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Mystic Chords of Memory

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 23, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

If you happened to wander into St. Joseph?s Church in Willimantic, Connecticut yesterday and heard the organ music, you would have been tempted to shout up to the organist, ?Could you try that last number?without the mittens.? In an effort to touch the mystic chords of memory, I returned to the instrument where I largely learned to play as a teenager and where I performed my one and only recital. Alas, it has been a few years since I touched the keyboard, so there were many and frequent wrong notes. But, I did, in fact, touch those mystic chords and they were not only musical in nature.

First a note about the organ. It is an 1874 instrument, built by the firm Steere & Turner, a Victorian gem not least because it is one of the few instruments by that builder that is not only extant, but is still in the room for which it was made. And such a room. A gothic revival structure of considerable length, the room formerly provided about 3-4 seconds resonance but that has been diminished by the installation of carpet down the aisles of the church. Carpet is the enemy of music and there is a profound and certain aesthetic obligation for all Catholics to insist that their pastors remove any carpet from their churches. Nonetheless, St. Joseph?s is a spacious room and the sound of the organ fills it easily.

There are several nice features to this organ. On the Swell, there is an Oboe stop that has an exquisite voice. The Diapason chorus, the meat of any organ, is as rich as chocolate cake. Since the days when I played it regularly, in the 1970s and 1980s, they have added a third Choir division and improved the action so that it is much easier to play, but also much less forgiving of mistakes! Mercifully, no one thought to alter the mechanical, or tracker, action that controls the keyboards and pedalboard. Throughout most of the twentieth century, most pipe organs had electric or electro-pneumatic action, that is, when you struck a key, a circuit was formed and an electric signal was sent to an electronic component at the foot of the pipe, which would open the wind channel, allowing the pipe to make a sound. This was before the days of microchips, so the electronics needed took up quite a bit of space and so the windchests had to be enlarged and the wind-pressure increased. This turned organ pipes into whistles, so the mouths of the pipes had to be nicked, dulling the sound. Most of the organs built in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s have a very muddy sound because of this method of construction. The organ at St. Joseph?s has mechanical action. You strike the key and it is connected to a series of wooden levers that lead to the windchest and open the airflow to the pipe. If you strike the key firmly, the note sounds firm. If you strike the key gently, the note sounds soft. Most important, the whole sounds crisp and clean. Bach played on mechanical action organs, obviously, and if it was good enough for him?.But, if you have ever gone back and read an account of, say, the 1939 World?s Fair, or examined the advertisements in an issue of Time or Life magazine from the 1950s, you will know that modernity and electricity went hand in hand, and no one questioned the interposition of either into an otherwise perfectly fine way of transacting business or, in this case, building organs.

In any event, I sat down at the new console, examined the additions, which included a very lovely 2? Waldflote on the new Choir division, useful for adding a light, airy sound. I played a few hymns to warm up then undertook Bach?s Prelude and Fugue in c minor, the ?Arnstadt? which went surprisingly well given the many moons since I had practiced, although the prelude fared better than the fugue. Bach?s chorale prelude

?Schmucke dich, o liebe Seele? was next and I used the exact same registration I used when I performed this in recital in 1981: 8? flute on the Great Manual, 8? foot Oboe in the Swell for the melody, and a 16? Bourdon in the Pedal, with the Great coupled to the Pedal. It was, in all humility, sublime, apart from a dropped note here and there. There is such a thing as ?music memory? and my fingers seemed to recall the notes of this beautiful Bach composition. On the other hand, to say that Mendelssohn?s Third Organ Sonata survived my mauling of it is like saying London survived the Blitz. It is true in the strictest sense, but no human ear would want to listen to this morning?s rendition ever again.

Sitting at the organ and making a lot of noise for an hour and one-half is always a good way to spend one?s time. But, sitting there brought back non-musical memories too, and memories quite seminal to my work here at NCR. For it was while I was learning to play the organ, at age fourteen and fifteen, that I first began to entertain serious questions about my Catholic faith. The Holy Spirit provided a remedy for both my musical and my theological interests in the person of the Rev. Joseph J. Kugler. He was the pastor of St. Joseph?s back then and was a serious musician himself and the most committed lover of music I have ever known. He would drive the two and one-half hours each way to New York City once or twice a week to hear concerts. He enticed wonderful singers to come to our church to perform. Joe even got Janet Baker to come to our corner of Connecticut once for a memorable performance at Sacred Heart Church in Taftville, a homely church with lovely acoustics. He read voraciously as well, and was one of, in not the most, thoroughly cultured and refined man I have ever known.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, over coffee in the rectory after a Sunday summertime Mass when I had filled in for the regular organist, I asked Joe some searching questions about the nature of our Catholicism and he put into my hands Hans Kung?s ?On Being a Christian,? which I devoured. Joe, who was a faithful NCR reader, set me on the path to what has become my life?s calling, an abiding interest in, and love for, the Catholic Church. It was at his kitchen table that I first began to recognize that the Catholic Church was not only the most interesting socio-cultural phenomenon in the world, but that I loved the Church deeply, more deeply than anything else in my life. Joe set me on the path, although we walked in different ways: He was, in both his politics and his religion, an unreconstructed 60?s liberal. Trained by the Sulpicians in Paris, he never met a rubric he did not break! He tolerated, but did not share, my more High Church instincts still less my more conservative ecclesiology. In politics, he was deeply suspicious of government authority and disdainful of both money and the manners of those who reveled in their ability to acquire it. But in the final analysis, Joe was a great pastor of souls, especially those who were facing the ultimate test of faith, the loss of a loved one. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination, I cooked a dinner for him and some friends which remains one of the most wonderful nights in my life. He was killed a few years later in a freak train accident.

Yesterday, reacquainting myself with my Bach and my Mendelssohn, I was more conscious of Joe?s presence than ever. He walks with me every morning when I turn on my computer and, because the thing I write about each morning is religion in some sense, I wondered yesterday ? and still wonder today - how different my life might have been had I not met Joe. Would I, like so many young people, have walked away from my faith, unsatisfied with the catechetical offerings usually provided to youngsters? Would I have learned to love theology and politics and the arts of conversation and argument? But, meet him I did, and one thing I do not question is that I remain, all these years later, indebted for the generosity he displayed in opening the organ loft to a teenager who wanted to practice, his willingness to share books and ideas and articles and conversation, the encouragement he gave a young man struggling to figure out which way to go in life. I do not think there has been a day since he died that was untouched by his memory, even if I was unconscious of it. He was a great friend and a great priest. Had he been there yesterday, he would have told me to practice every day I am home this week and next, and then we would have headed over to the rectory for a good conversation. How blessed I am to have had such a mentor and such a memory, and how fortunate to be able to touch that chord yesterday, sitting at a Victorian organ in a mercifully empty church. Empty, that is, of everything but the memories of a great priest and a great friend.

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