



# PALO ALTO/PENINSULA CHAPTER AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

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## NEWSLETTER—JULY/AUGUST 2012

### FROM THE DEAN

Dear Chapter Colleagues:

This newsletter will be arriving in many of your mailboxes (and email inboxes) just as the national AGO convention gets underway in Nashville. I look forward to a week celebrating a wide range of organ and choral music, enjoying the exhibits and the workshops, and—most of all—catching up with colleagues and friends, including many of you! We have scheduled our chapter reception in honor of Adam Detzner on Monday following the evening concert; if you will be in Nashville and can attend, please text me at 650-283-7512 if you need venue information.



July 1 also marks the end of one chapter program year and the beginning of another. As I look back over 2011-2012, I feel honored to have been dean during a year that has seen us offer such a wide range of programs of a consistently high quality and with such strong rates of participation, including the three events that have occurred since the last newsletter: the composers' forum, the master class with Samuel Soria, and the members' recital. For a chapter of our size to have offered nine such programs is an amazing achievement, and all the more so since it followed on from our co-hosting such a successful regional convention in July. None of this would have been possible without our resourceful, insightful, and committed board members: David Sheetz, Douglas Franks, Jill Mueller, Jay Martin, Donald Mulliken, Sarah Wannamaker, Keith Wannamaker, Jeffrey Abbott, and Tim Getz.

Once again I'd like to thank Tim, with assistance from David and Doug, for producing our marvelous newsletters. Our regional councillor Leslie Wolf Robb recently wrote me that they set "a wonderful example of professionalism for our whole region," and I heartily concur. Special thanks also go to our other officers: Douglas our secretary takes minutes that are both precise and color-coded to help us keep on track; Jay does a beautiful job of keeping our website current and

accurate; Jill has both ensured that our financial accounts were balanced throughout the year and serves as registrar as we conclude this time of membership renewals; most of all, thanks to David for orchestrating such an exhilarating symphony of programs for us!

We already have several exciting things planned for the 2012-2013 program year. At David's recommendation to the board, we successfully applied for a grant from the San Francisco chapter Special Projects Fund for the cost of singers at a presentation on Jewish liturgical music. We also look forward to welcoming acclaimed organist Christopher Houlihan to lead a master class with some of our younger members. To cap off the year, we are planning to host a Pipe Organ Encounter (POE) next summer. POEs are week-long residential programs that have brought many young people to the organ, and it is an exciting possibility for us to be presenting one. However, they do require a large number of volunteers, from committee roles to teaching. If you might be willing to help, please write Rani Fischer [ranifisc@gmail.com](mailto:ranifisc@gmail.com) to learn more.

Finally, thank YOU all for helping to make this year so successful—we couldn't do it without your ideas, your talents, your membership dues, and above all your commitment to the organ as a musical instrument. I hope you are able to enjoy some rest this summer, and look forward to seeing you on **Sunday September 2** for our traditional kick-off BBQ lunch at Christ Church, Portola Valley.

With appreciation,  
Matthew

The PAPenAGO newsletter is published bimonthly in September, November, January, March, May, and July. Submissions (concert listings, job announcements, articles, etc.) are welcome and are due the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month preceding publication. They may be sent to editor Tim Getz at [tim@gracepa.org](mailto:tim@gracepa.org).

## **Sal Soria Workshop on Hymn Improvisation: “Keep It Simple!”** by Douglas Franks

A couple dozen organists from both the Palo Alto/ Peninsula and San Francisco AGO chapters met May 7 at Grace Lutheran Church in San Mateo to learn about hymn improvisation from Sal Soria, cathedral organist at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Originally scheduled to take place at Transfiguration Episcopal Church in San Mateo, the workshop venue had to be changed at the last minute. We owe many thanks to Grace Lutheran organist Robert Meier who welcomed us into his organ gallery with only a few hours' notice. Grace's two-manual Zimmer pipe organ was perfectly adequate for our purposes.

Mr. Soria focused on how to create a hymn improvisation for use as communion music, an organ voluntary, or hymn introduction. He prefers not to improvise during congregational hymn-singing, so “fancying-up” a verse for accompaniment was not an area we explored, although embellishing a hymn to create solo variations certainly was. Improvising an extended coda after a hymn was another form of improvisation-for-use he brought to our attention.

Ways of varying a hymn for “atmospheric” purposes during communion are: Playing basic chord clusters within the key as accompaniment to the hymn tune; using alternate harmonizations underneath the hymn tune; changing the hymn's rhythm or meter; elongating the hymn tune's rhythmic values; increasing the amount of movement in the accompaniment; and adding interludes between verses. One should “look at the hymn” first and be guided by the text. Matthew Burt demonstrated some of these approaches, as did the presenter, with “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.”



Sal Soria, Ethan Haman, Matthew Burt, Sarah Wannamaker

Mr. Soria encouraged us to “keep it simple.” A good application of that rule of thumb is to reshape a hymn into a trio. A trio texture is a rich template and even works quite well for a hymn-based *organo pleno* postlude, something he demonstrated to good effect. He advised us to explore additional techniques appropriate within a trio setting, such as following the melodic contour, reiterating the rhythm of the melody, mirroring or echoing the melody in the left hand, “using more fingers” (i.e., thickening the chordal texture) towards the end of a piece, alternating hands while playing fast notes in toccata-style, and prominently sounding the hymn tune in the pedal, a model favored by Mr. Soria. Young organist Ethan Haman volunteered to play two verses (with interlude) of “Amazing Grace” that he had prepared ahead of time, one with an alternate harmonization, the other with an elaborated melody. Mr. Soria challenged him to come up with another variation on the spot. This led to a snappy, upbeat rendering by Ethan, followed by some experimentation with melody in the pedal.

Sarah Wannamaker offered up two improvised verses of “On Christmas Night” (SUSSEX CAROL), the first with a waltz-like accompaniment and the second with a syncopated accompaniment. Mr. Soria cautioned us “not to let the fingers go faster than the brain allows.” Sarah's reprise at a slower tempo produced a more stable and controlled improvisation and allowed time for some registration changes.

In response to questions about preparing an improvisation ahead of time, the presenter affirmed that some forethought is helpful, especially if you're planning on inventing something like a full-fledged postlude. Harmonic ideas, key changes, and other specific techniques or cues may be noted down in “cheat-sheet” fashion. He recommended boldness and “getting physical” when we “draw a blank” while improvising. Practicing on piano to find one's own harmonic language is another skill-building tool.

For sheer enjoyment as we neared the conclusion of the workshop, Mr. Soria improvised on HYFRYDOL in French Classic style with some modern touches—deGrigny shaking hands with Sowerby! He also improvised a chaconne built upon a descending four-note pedal line, and by request improvised an extended piece in the style of Herbert Howells. He added accompaniment to a plainsong melody (VICTIMAE PASCHALI LAUDES) and abiding by his maxim, kept it simple—and it was simply beautiful! With regard to accompanying plainsong, he remarked that sometimes it's best if the organ is tacet. Quite a proposition at a gathering of organists!

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The workshop atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable at all times, thanks to our guest's down-to-earth, unpressured, inviting manner. Master organist and prize-winning improviser though Sal Soria is, he treated us collegially and made us feel that if he could do it, we could do it. We ended the evening feeling confident, emboldened, and with better-equipped improvisation "toolkits" in hand.

### **Chapter Members Fare Well at Members' Recital** by Douglas Franks

Thanks to the musical offerings of several Palo Alto/Peninsula AGO Board members and three St. Paul's staff musicians, audience members enjoyed an afternoon of fine organ music performed at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Burlingame on its newly "restored" Aeolian-Skinner organ. The June 2 concert, Palo Alto/Peninsula AGO's season closer, had vigor, virtuosity, variety, and very well-prepared performers.

Chapter board member Keith Wannamaker began with Maurice Duruflé's "Fugue sur le thème du Carillon des Heures de la Cathédral de Soissons," an energetic piece whose fugue subject is based on the sequence of notes struck by the clock-carillon at Soissons Cathedral in France. Its busy counterpoint gave way to muscular block chords at the end in heroic "grande-orgue" style.

Former chapter dean Rani Fischer was next on the program and presented an improvisation of her own on the Pentecost plainsong chant VENI CREATOR SPIRITUS. She explored a variety of techniques, including pedal points, quartal harmonies, changes of registration and color, melodic fragments in the pedal with reeds, dynamic ups and downs, and textural ebbs and flows. Her improvisation was pensive, spacious, and cohesive—one only regrets we'll never hear it again!

St. Paul's organ scholar Michael Caraher gave an impressive rendering of the first two movements of Léon Boëllmann's "Suite Gothique." Confidence and familiarity with St. Paul's organ shone through as he brought out the dramatic contrasts of the first movement and elegant dance-like character of the second, "Menuet Gothique." Let us hope we hear more from Mr. Caraher.

Chapter subdean David Sheetz returned us to the Anglican roots behind St. Paul's Aeolian-Skinner by playing Herbert Howells' "Intrada No. 2," wryly informing us that there is no "Intrada No. 1." Likening the piece to Howells' six organ psalm-preludes, David skillfully projected many of the composer's signature traits: a plaintive melody atop soft dreamy accompaniment, complex harmonies (at

times having an almost jazz-like flavor) and harmonic rhythm, long arching crescendos and diminuendos, heart-rending fortissimo passages, massive chords sculpted from his unique harmonic language, an expansive train of thought, a final reiteration of the opening thematic material—no less plaintive than before—and a pervasive undercurrent of somberness and longing.

St. Paul's Music Director Susan Jane Matthews and her parish colleague, Thomas Joyce, performed as duo pianist and organist in the next piece, "Neumark Variations" for organ and piano (1987) by Harold Stover (born 1946). The hymn tune NEUMARK is commonly known as "If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee." A lengthy work consisting of many strikingly dissimilar variations (including a tongue-in-cheek Stephen Foster-style setting), "Neumark Variations" exposed listeners to a new world of how organ and piano can be creatively teamed. The interplay between the two instruments was fascinating. Your attention was drawn to each in its turn; at other times, the ensemble itself prevailed. You heard each instrument at its idiomatic best, sometimes in the foreground, at other times on equal footing with the other, transforming and elevating the music into a brand new idiom. Bravo to Ms. Matthews and Mr. Joyce for their brilliant artistry and adventurous programming. Their performance was a revelation.

The final piece of the recital was J. S. Bach's monumental Toccata, Adagio, and Fugue in C played by our chapter's newsletter editor Timothy Getz. He not only demonstrated total command of this demanding piece, but clearly affirmed that the organ and acoustics at St. Paul's are suited to Bach—the ringing but balanced upperwork, clarity of tone, room-filling depth and body, enough mixture and reed color to deliver a satisfying plenum.

The masterful music contributions of our Palo Alto/Peninsula colleagues made for a memorable afternoon of organ (and piano) music. The recital was also a perfect opportunity to hear St. Paul's refurbished organ. Well done, musicians, and well done, Edward Millington Stout III, who oversaw the renovation and was present that afternoon to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

#### **POSITIONS AVAILABLE**

Transfiguration Episcopal Church, San Mateo  
Director of Music (part-time)  
contact the Rev. Matthew Woodward,  
[rector@transfig-sm.org](mailto:rector@transfig-sm.org)

First Lutheran Church, Palo Alto  
Organist (part-time)  
contact the Organist Search Committee  
[organistsearch@flcpa.org](mailto:organistsearch@flcpa.org)



**Electronics at Concerts:  
Another Perspective**  
by Matthew Burt

I must confess that I found Lea Schmidt-Rogers' article about electronics at student contests and concerts in the May/June newsletter somewhat unsettling. After sharing my thoughts at our recent board meeting, I was encouraged to briefly offer a response in the newsletter, which I am happy to do.

As somebody who lives in Silicon Valley and who is married to somebody in the internet and mobile technology industry, I am well aware that many people in our region much younger than I rely on texting, tweeting, taking photographs, and posting to Facebook as their primary means of communication with their friends. While I understand Lea's concerns about competitions, I think it is inevitable and even desirable that social media should play a role in other musical presentations, especially those aimed at young people. Some of you may have read that the San Francisco Symphony is permitting the use of Twitter and similar applications during performances in certain parts of Davies Symphony Hall this summer. To those who grew up without cell phones, this might seem distracting or rude; however, just think of the ways in which this technology enables dozens of people to learn about classical music in real time through the commentary of their peers. So often we in the AGO lament the lack of interest in the organ, or even in classical music altogether, among young people. Yet I suspect that many of these technologies offer us opportunities to engage those same people in new and exciting ways—but only if we use them on their terms, not ours.

**2013 Pipe Organ Encounter**  
by Rani Fischer

We are taking this summer to plan a Pipe Organ Encounter (POE) at Stanford University for next summer, July 21-27, 2013. This is a very exciting and worthwhile project, to introduce teen-age pianists and organists to the organ through a full week of lessons, concerts, workshops, organ crawls, and trips to various sites in the Bay Area.

Many thanks to Robert Huw Morgan for his assistance and contributions to this endeavor. Here is our committee, though we still welcome more people:

Director: Rani Fischer  
Facilities Coordinator: Brian Larsen  
Faculty Coordinator: Angela Kraft Cross  
Funding Coordinator: Catha Hall  
Publicity Coordinator: Margaret Kvamme

Secretary/Registrar: Rani Fischer  
Treasurer: Beatrice Martin-Spangler  
Liaison to the Executive Board: Tim Getz

Please let any one of us know if you are available the week of July 21-27, 2013. We will need many chaperones (3+ hours at a time) and drivers for twenty teenagers.

**Organ Open House at St. Bede's**

Come meet and watch two organ builders from Hamburg renovate the 1969 Beckerath organ every Wednesday and Thursday, 2:00-4:00 p.m. August 8-September 27, at St. Bede's Church, 2650 Sand Hill Road, Menlo Park. Hans-Ulrich Erbslöh and his colleague will be here for seven weeks during which time they will dismantle, clean, re-pitch, replace swimmers, and do lots of other things to this organ. Mr. Erbslöh worked for Beckerath for 27 years as head voicer before starting his own company. The St. Bede's organ is one that he voiced himself and he is eager to restore it to its original state.

**OFFICERS**

**Palo Alto/Peninsula Chapter AGO  
July 2012-June 2013**

Matthew Burt, Dean  
David Sheetz, Subdean  
Douglas Franks, Secretary  
Jill Mueller, Treasurer and Registrar

Members-at-Large:  
Jay Martin, Webmaster & Keith Wannamaker  
(Class of 2013)  
Jeffrey Abbott & Tim Getz, Newsletter Editor  
(Class of 2014)  
Donald Mulliken & Sarah Wannamaker  
(Class of 2015)

**CONCERT/EVENT LISTINGS**

**Saturday, June 30, 8:00 p.m.**  
Rodney Gehrke, organist  
All Saints Episcopal Church, Palo Alto  
J.S. Bach Preludes and Fugues  
\$30, benefit for California Bach Society

**Tuesday, August 7, 7:00 p.m.**  
Marina Omelchenko, organist  
St. Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco  
Ms. Omelchenko is organist at the Catholic Church of the Most Holy Mother of God in Vladivostok, Russia, on a musical missionary tour of the United States to help raise funds for a new pipe organ for her church.

FOR ADDITIONAL CALENDAR LISTINGS please see the San Francisco Chapter's Bay Area Concert Calendar at: <http://tinyurl.com/vzccqdf>