

FORTY YEARS COMMISSIONING ORGAN MUSIC

Marilyn Mason

In 1946, as a fledgling teacher, it seemed to me that there was a dearth of contemporary music for my instrument. My teacher, Palmer Christian, had introduced the music of Messiaen to me in 1945. (The writer was later to play one of the first American performances of Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* in 1952, at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Brooklyn). I wanted to interest and encourage Americans to write for this great instrument, while aiming for diversity among composers and works.

I usually invited those who have not written at all for the organ or those who have written only a small amount of music. Two exceptions have been Jean Langlais and Leo Sowerby. I particularly invited Langlais to write a work which would be suitable for American organs.

I had been a friend of Sowerby's for many years and asked him to write for me. When he told me the work was finished, I visited him in Camp Wa-Li-Ro to see it. The particular work he had written was untitled; he did have the tempo marking of "Bright, Blithe and Brisk." I said, "I really like that for a title." He said, "Use it."

A commission may be born of one's interaction with a composer. For many summers, while studying toward a doctoral degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, I taught at Columbia University, where Henry Cowell was my colleague. A chance remark of mine, "How about an organ piece?" resulted in the *Chorale and Fuguing Tune* (1953).

A magical fall day in 1947 created the right atmosphere for a first commission. I was walking across the "Diag" of the Michigan campus after practicing at Hill Auditorium (best times: 4:30 A.M. till 9 A.M.). I met my composer-colleague Edmund Haines and said, "How about a work for the organ?" His reply, "I know nothing about the organ so I have never written organ music." "How about listening to some organ music?" I returned to Hill with the composer in tow: He listened to the *Fantasia in G Minor* of Bach. He smiled and said, "I am interested." As a result of that day, my very first commission, the *Suite for Organ* was born. It won the AGO composition award in 1948. It was later republished by H.W. Gray and titled *Three Pieces for Organ*.

The composer's verbal program note: "The Prelude is the opening scene: I imagine a young lady walking down Fifth Avenue in a hoopskirt. The Aria is the song she sings; the Toccata is a fine ending."

The only solo organ work of Ernst Krenek's was his *Sonata*. I felt this was not enough, so I invited him to write the



Ernst Krenek and Marilyn Mason on the occasion of concert honoring his 85th birthday

Orga-Nastro (1971), which I premiered at the University of Michigan. Another work I commissioned from him was the *Vier-Winde Suite*, which I premiered in Düsseldorf. Along with those commissions, came a splendid work from his wife, Gladys Nordenstrom, *Signals from Nowhere* (1973), which I premiered at Pomona College. After I played a concert in October 1985 honoring Krenek's 85th birthday, he wrote: "Marilyn Mason has commissioned two works from me and has also played them many times in my presence. I admired particularly the precise coordination of her playing with the electronic tape in my *Orga-Nastro* which obtained just recently a special success in Palm Desert."

Often composers have said to me that because they do not understand or know the organ, they feel that they cannot write for the instrument. It is the organist's responsibility to introduce the composer to the instrument, defining its possibilities and colors, and such basic items as the actual range of pedal and keyboard. Differences between mechanical-action and electropneumatic instruments should also be discussed.

Some commissions lead to others: When I invited Paul Creston to write, I made a special trip to the Actor's Chapel (St. Malachy's Church) in New York. After mass was over, I visited with him. There the idea of a multi-movement work was born and eventually the *Suite* (1957). On the basis of that, the Cleveland Chapter of the AGO commissioned the *Fantasia for Organ*.

Two spin-offs have resulted from my interest in commissions:

1. The Marilyn Mason Commissioning Fund was established in 1976 by friends and former students to honor my 30 years of teaching at the University of Michigan.
2. The International Organ Competition. Every year a work is commissioned by the Michigan organ faculty. Funds come from the Marilyn Mason Commissioning Fund. The work becomes a required piece in the final round of the competition.

My initial goal was to commission one work each year; sometimes there have been more than one. As a result of 40 years' association with the University of Michigan, I have to date commissioned 41 works for organ and have premiered almost all of them. (The Marilyn Mason Contemporary Series was published by H.W. Gray. Some of these compositions are in that series.)

Organ Music Commissioned By Marilyn Mason

- Edmund Haines, *Suite for Organ* (1947); Glen Rock, N.J.: J. Fischer, 1948. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1947)
Henry Cowell, *Chorale and Fuguing Tune* (1953); manuscript. (premiered, Columbia University, 1953)
Raphael Valerio, *Toccata* (1954); manuscript. (premiered, Rollins College, 1959)
Normand Lockwood, *Quiet Piece* (1954); manuscript. (premiered, Columbia University, 1954)
Ben Weber, *Closing Piece*, Op. 36 (1954); New York: New Music Edition, Oct. 1954. (premiered, Columbia University, 1954)

THURSDAY

Ross Lee Finney, *Fantasy* (1957); manuscript. (premiered, New York, 1957)
 Florian Mueller, *Arioso and Toccata* (1957); manuscript. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1957)
 Ulysses Kay, *Suite for Organ* (1958); manuscript. (premiered, New York, 1958)
 Burrill Phillips, *Sinfonia Brevis* (1958); manuscript. (premiered, Columbia University, 1958)
 Paul Creston, *Suite for Organ* (1957); New York: Ricordi, 1958. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1957)
 Jean Langlais, *Miniature* (1958); New York: H.W. Gray, 1959. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1958)
 Alec Wyton, *Dithyramb* (1958); New York: H.W. Gray, 1960. (premiered, New York, 1959)
 John Cook, *Flourish and Fugue* (1959); New York: H.W. Gray, 1962. (premiered, New York, 1959)
 Henry Woodward, *Chorale Prelude on "Leoni"* (1959); manuscript. (premiered, Rollins College, 1959)
 John Beck, *Suite for Organ* (1964); manuscript. (premiered, AGO National Convention, Philadelphia, 1964)
 Kevin Norris, *Concert Music for Organ and Strings* (1964); manuscript. (premiered, AGO National Convention, Philadelphia, 1964)
 John Cook, *Toccata for Organ and Brass* (1965); manuscript. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1965)
 Gerald Near, *Concertino for Two Organs* (1965); manuscript. (premiered, AGO Regional Convention, Denver, 1965)
 Gerald Near, *Suite for Organ* (1965); New York: H.W. Gray, 1966. (premiered, AGO Regional Convention, Ann Arbor, 1965)
 Iain Hamilton, *Threnos* (1966); New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1968. (premiered, Westminster Abbey, 1966)
 Leo Sowerby, *Bright, Blithe and Brisk* (1966); New York: H.W. Gray, 1967. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1966)
 Niccolo Castiglioni, *April is the Cruellest Month* (1968); manuscript.
 William Albright, *Pneuma* (1966); Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Elkan-Vogel, 1969. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1969)
 William Albright, *Organ Book II* (1971); Paris: Jobert, 1973. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1971)
 Ernst Krenek, *Orga-Nastro* (1971); manuscript. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1971)
 Gladys Krenek, *Signals from Nowhere for Organ and Electronic Tape* (1973); manuscript. (premiered, Pomona College, 1975)
 Alden Ashforth, *Sailing to Byzantium for Organ and Electronic Tape* (1973); manuscript. (premiered, Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., AGO Regional Convention, 1973)
 Thomas Janson, *Celestial Autumn* (1973); Melville, N.Y.: Belwin-Mills. (premiered, University of Michigan, 1973)
 Thomas Janson, *Sparkler* (1975); manuscript.
 Ernst Krenek, *Four-Wind Suite*, Op. 233 (1975); manuscript. (premiered, Johannis-kirche, Düsseldorf, 1977)
 Bengt Hambraeus, *Advent for Organ, Brass and Percussion* (1975); manuscript. (premiered, Association of Anglican Musicians, Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Mich., 1977)



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Wallace Berry, *Variations on a "Martyrs" Tune* (1976); manuscript. (premiered, National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C., 1976)
 Lawrence Schreiber, *Variations on Black American Themes* (1977); manuscript.
 Normand Lockwood, *Concerto II for Organ and Brass* (1977); manuscript. (premiered, Colorado Women's College, 1978)
 David Johnson, *Variations on William Billings's "Chester"* (1977); manuscript.
 Vincent Persichetti, *Dryden Variations* (1979); manuscript. (premiered, AGO National Convention, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., 1980)

Nicholas Jackson, *Suite on the Magnificat* (1981). (premiered, St. David's Cathedral, Wales)
 Ernst Leitner, *Four Dances for Pedals* (1982).
 Edith Borroff, *Variations on Two American Tunes* (1982). (premiered, University of Michigan, 1982)
 Edith Borroff, *An American Olio: Duet* (1983). (premiered, First Conference on Women in Music, University of Michigan, 1983)
 William Albright, *De Spiritum* (1980). (premiered, Denver, Colo., 1986)