

The Muse's Voice: A Musforum Conference

June 19–20, 2015, New York City

By Gail Archer

Musforum, the network for female organists, held its first conference, “The Muse’s Voice,” in New York City on June 19 and 20, 2015, at four churches that boast women as music directors and organists: West End Collegiate Church, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, the Church of the Transfiguration, and St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Women who are organists, composers, and conductors from across the United States and Canada were the featured artists, and the programs included works by female composers. The conference was made possible, in part, by a generous grant from Barnard College, Columbia University.

The events began at noon on June 19 with a keynote address by **Susan Ferré**, who currently serves as music director of the non-profit organization Music in the Great North Woods (www.musicgnw.org) and as director of music and organist at St. Barnabas Church in Gorham, New Hampshire. A distinguished teacher of organ, Ferré served on the faculties of Pacific Lutheran University, Southern Methodist University, Perkins School of Theology, University of North Texas, and the University of Paris at Vincennes. For more than twenty years, she directed the Texas Baroque Ensemble, which presented little-known works on original instruments, and for fourteen years, directed the Early Music Weekend at Round Top, Texas.

In her address, Ferré spoke about her early experiences with sacred music, listening to African-American children singing hymns in a tiny schoolhouse in Ohio. During her college years in Texas, she encountered women who held prominent positions as college and church musicians in Texas and Oklahoma: Helen Hewitt at North Texas, Dora Poteet at Southern Methodist University, and Joyce Jones at Baylor. Moving to Paris for advanced studies with Jean Langlais, Ferré met the French masters Darius Milhaud, André Marchal, and Olivier Messiaen. Her experiences shaped her professional approach to the problems and prejudice that female organists face in the modern world. She suggested that fairness for all needs to become our goal, “The ‘token female’ becomes the ‘smart choice’ for the common good.” Women need to search for beauty and then communicate that joy and beauty with fearless determination.

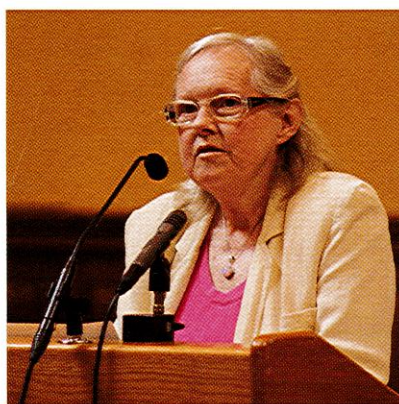
Rather, the role of the artist is transcendent: non-rational forces are essential to being whole as a human being. This is not quantifiable, but rather, art is able to express grief, beauty, love, to struggle with our own humanity, our own mortality. It is not empirically measurable, but the search for meaning comes through art, which has origins in all religious expression, fused with art, poetry, and music.

Following a delicious and convivial luncheon, the afternoon performances featured Canadian organist **Karen Holmes** and a song cycle by composer **Pamela Decker** for piano, soprano, and dancer. Holmes delved into the French Canadian tradition with lively, short organ works from an anonymous 17th-century manuscript, *Livre d’orgue de Montreal*. Her program included *Courtes Pieces*, Vol. VII, by Canadian composer Rachel Laurin and the *Chromatic Partita* by Ruth Watson Henderson. Pamela Decker wrote the poetry for her song cycle, *Haven: Songs of Mystery and of Memory*, and played the piano as accompanist for soprano **Katherine Byrnes** and dancer **Clare Elise Hancock**. The hour-long work has fourteen songs, some for soprano and piano alone, and others choreographed by the dancer. The performers used the whole space, having cleared the altar area to take advantage of the various heights of the front of the sanctuary at West End Collegiate Church. The music and dance combined beautifully to express the color, emotion, and elegance of the poetry.

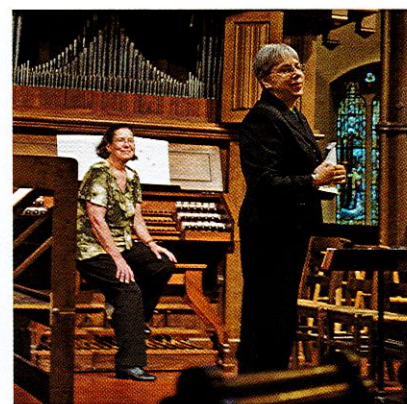
Moving to Emmanuel Lutheran Church on Manhattan’s East Side, we enjoyed a wine and cheese hour prior to the evening performance by harpsichordist **Alexandra Dunbar** and violinist **Karen Dekker**. Music director **Gwendolyn Toth** very kindly allowed us to use one of her large two-manual harpsichords for the performance. Dunbar and Dekker offered a splendid early music program with selections by Bach, Couperin, Biber, and Corelli. The ensemble playing was perfectly coordinated; the rhythmic energy, precise articulation, and flawless technique made the repertoire come alive, both in the poignant slow movements and in the spirited finales.

Our second day began early in the morning on June 20 with a varied program by **Christa Rakich** on the Fisk organ at the Church of the Transfiguration. Rakich arranged a *Sonata in F* for flute and basso continuo by Anna Amalia, Princess of Prussia, for organ solo. The three-movement work is full of late-Baroque verve and humor and worked very well indeed as a piece for organ alone. Rakich juxtaposed chorale preludes by Johannes Brahms and Ethel Smyth on the tune *O Taurigkeit, O Herzeleid* and then contributed her own composition, *Hommage à Pachelbel*. The program concluded with the American premiere of a demanding recent work by the Dutch organist and composer Margaretha Christina de Jong, *Prelude, Choral varié et Fugue sur Veni Redemptor Gentium*.

Composer **Hilary Tann** discussed the creative process involved in her



Susan Ferré



Christa Rakich, Gail Archer



Hilary Tann



Katelyn Emerson

recent commission for the American Guild of Organists, *Embertides*. **Louise Mundinger** gave a detailed analysis of the piece along with a performance of excerpts, with extensive commentary from Hilary Tann. The morning concluded with two hours of inspired playing by four young women who are pursuing graduate study or have recently completed advanced programs in organ performance: **Katelyn Emerson** (one of THE DIAPASON’s “20 under 30” Class of 2015), **Mary Copeley**, **Emma Whitten**, and **Ashley Snively**.

In the afternoon session, **Marie Rubis Bauer**, the organist of St. Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska, presented an eclectic program of early works by Scheidemann, Sweelinck, Aguilera de Heredia, and selections from a contemporary composition, *Windows of Comfort: Two Organbooks* by Dan Locklair. One of the most uplifting moments of the conference was the Evensong service at 4 p.m. at the Church of the Transfiguration. The celebrant of the service was the Rector, **Bishop Andrew St. John**. Music director **Claudia Dumschat** led her children’s choir in two English anthems, *O Praise the Lord* by Maurice Greene and *Evening Hymn* by Henry Purcell; the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis settings were composed by Sarah MacDonald. The angelic voices of the young singers were graciously accompanied by organist **Judith Hancock**.

The gala evening recital took place at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, featuring **Kimberly Marshall**, **Sarah Jane Starcher Germani**, **Jennifer Pascual**, and **Gail Archer**. Marshall offered the Mass *L’Homme armé* by Margaret Vardell Sandresky; Starcher Germani presented Bach’s *Prelude and Fugue in A Major*, BWV 536, selections by Jeanne Demessieux, and Alexandre Guilmant’s *Postlude for the Feast of the Assumption*. Music director Pascual and Archer played programs composed by women: Libby Larsen, Johanna Senfter, Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, and Jeanne Demessieux, among others.

All the participants remarked upon the supportive and kind atmosphere of the weekend—we came together to affirm one another and to celebrate



Kimberly Marshall

women as organists, composers, and conductors. We had enough social time to have meaningful conversations about our work; we made new friendships and deepened long-standing ties among our colleagues. Many women who are organists live a continent away from one another and have only rare opportunities to interact professionally. One can feel isolated and even discouraged by the general culture of the organ world, which too often diminishes the contribution of highly educated and skilled female musicians. Musforum grew out of my research on the success of female organists, which I published in the *Journal of the International Alliance of Women in Music* in spring 2013. The database of female organists is on the Musforum site: www.musforum.org as well as the complete program, biographies, photos, and an archival recording of the conference under “Events.” All women, no matter what age or point in their professional career, are welcome in the Musforum network. Join us by sending an e-mail to garcher@barnard.edu. Women need to move forward in the field on the basis of merit: their education, skill, and accomplishment. The world will be enriched by our musical gifts, and we will lift up hearts and minds by the beauty and powerful inspiration of our song. ■

Gail Archer is college organist at Vassar College and director of the music program at Barnard College, Columbia University, where she conducts the Barnard-Columbia Chorus. She serves as director of the artist and young organ artist recitals at historic Central Synagogue, New York City.

Photo credit: Camille June Gregoire