

CHILDREN'S MUSIC AND ARTS CAMP AND THE PIPE ORGAN

Beryl Bell Elwood

GRACE Episcopal Church in Orange Park, Florida (a suburb of Jacksonville), was planning its seventh annual music and arts camp for children of the church and the community for July 2003. The vision of James R. Hart, our director of music and the arts, the camp had started in 1997 under Sarah Kehrt's leadership with 55 or 60 children and had grown to 112 children in its sixth season.

The primary "product" of the camp is the production of a children's musical on Friday evening at the end of one week. Connie Fortunato has been our guest clinician and conductor since the beginning. What a marvel she is! When the children register for camp, they receive a CD of the musical and a score. Tryouts (for which Miss Connie comes to town) are in the middle of May. By the time mid-July and camp time come around, the children have memorized their speaking parts, solos, and chorus songs. Each camp morning opens with a plenary chorus rehearsal. Children then attend two elective course offerings, such as puppets, Orff, recorder, instrument choir, scenery, dramatic play, handbells, handchimes, dance, art, and musical crafts. The morning ends with a shorter plenary chorus rehearsal. Children who have auditioned and won acceptance to a special chorus known as the Schola Cantorum bring sack lunches, eat, and then rehearse in the afternoon.

I am the church organist and I wanted to heighten awareness of and interest in our church organ through this camp.

Let me tell you our story and why I felt this was necessary. Our church sent away its unreliable 32 ranks of pipe organ in January of 2002 for rebuilding while we redesigned and enlarged our worship space. Before the pipes left, my husband put the ladder up to the overhead pipe chamber faithfully after both Sunday morning services for several weeks for anyone who could and would climb up to see what created that sound we thrilled to. Then when the organ came down, folks were invited by to blow a pipe and be awed by the complexity of it all. Our chapel Allen is doing a fine job of substituting for the pipe organ in the new worship space. However, having a more compact console than the pipe organ had and being much more easily moved than our pipe organ console was, the Allen got tucked almost invisibly into a niche behind the piano, which leads the praise music sections of our services.

The church music department has been tasked with raising the money for rebuilding the organ. I suggested that repositioning the console for visibility to the congregation might be highly desirable. Besides, I really could not hear the organ at all where the console was situated. I could check out registrations by playing into the sequencer and going out and listening when I was rehearsing. But during the services I was reluctant to make real-time adjustments, for I just could not hear. I exercised all my powers of persuasion and lo! the console was moved from behind the piano and about twelve feet down the side aisle. Now I could see the priest at the altar (kind of a plus!), and I could hear the organ much better. How surprised I was to hear how bold the Allen Swell Trumpet was! I blushed at the thought of how the organ must have sounded when I in desperation would add the trumpet so I could almost hear the organ, and now realized it may have been way too much. At the present, the console is twelve feet farther along the side aisle (now 24 feet from the chancel). This is the location recommended by both our organ-builder and the Allen representative as the best position for the organist to hear the organ. They are right and I am reveling in hearing the organ and the congregation unbelievably well! When the choir resumed for the fall, since our choir sings from the chancel steps and the director must pivot 120 degrees to see me, I feared my great joy was coming to an end, but in Advent my delight continues! The console presently is quite visible and people passing by after Communion covertly look at my feet. (I put TireFlys [those tiny colored lights for bicycle and automobile valve stems] on my organ shoes, but my feet don't make enough of a jolt or else I can't get enough centrifugal action into my ankles to make them light up.)

But I digress. This is all about raising awareness of and appreciation for the pipe organ. Therefore, I volunteered to teach a class in organ for young pianists in the camp. There was no time, I was told. I did not expect the class to be an "elective" and compete with dance, etc., and besides I was already teaching handbells and handchimes, so I had no elective period free. Of course, the true determining factor was the availability of the worship space in which the organ sits. During the two periods when electives were offered, that space was always occupied with soloists practicing for

the musical with Miss Connie or dancers or actors being blocked for the production. I said how about doing the organ class during lunch. The response would be a puzzled look. I persisted and said it quite a few more times! It got to be like a call and response or a liturgy: "Pipe organ class?" "No time." "Lunch time?" "Hmmm." And then the next day I'd start all over again! Finally I heard the OK!

AGO Headquarters sent me a packet of helpful materials and I had material from the Wichita children's organ project from several years ago. I read through my file of clippings from TAO on other folks' activities combining children and the organ and even viewed my copy of Guy Bovet's filmstrip, *Peep the Piper*. We would have class time during which the children would eat their lunches. But we also were expected to perform on Saturday morning at the electives demonstration program. Therefore, we had to be outcome-based (old definition!). All my reading went into my head and would have to come out as needed. I made a lesson plan but scrapped it very quickly to follow curiosity's lead.

Introduction to Pipe Organ happened! The camp brochure said it was for children from grade 5 to grade 7 who had studied piano. I modified that, for I knew of two sisters who were rising third- and fourth-graders who had played well at their spring piano recital (I tried to do my homework). I had the advantage of having experienced most of these eight children in other situations and thus was aware of their idiosyncrasies and their tendencies toward wildness, disruptiveness, chatting, inattention, etc. I contacted every child who registered for organ class or a parent to be sure all truly had taken piano lessons. I inquired as to the title of recital pieces and asked each child to bring her spring recital music and be prepared to play it. I realized that my class was going to have to be very concise, very fast-paced, and quite controlled in order to give each child bench and exploration time, and at the same time keep those munching their lunches in the choir pews involved and focused. I fantasized about "fascinated"! Each child's bench time had to accrue to the benefit of all.

We had four boys and four girls in our class. It was five days, 25 minutes each, of fast facts about all those numbers facing us, answers to why can't I see the flute, which hand always plays up on top, what's the gas pedal for, what do the fractions and Roman numerals mean, where's middle C, taking turns exploring the tone colors, and discovering the range of pitches available to one key. I'm sure you know the drill! We examined and puffed gently on a rank of tiny cast-off wooden pipes. Each child blew an old Cornopean pipe and then played his or her piece. We heard a Kuhnau sonatina, a Bach minuet, a simplified Malaguena, La Cucaracha, two pieces from the Alfred books, "Ode to Joy," and the theme from "Pink Panther!"

The camp's production of Allan Pote and Tom Long's *Rescue in the Night*, the story of Daniel in the lion's den, played to a very full



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house Friday night and was both well done and well received. It had poignancy for some of the teenage assistants who were dancing lions in our production of the same musical in 1997, our first year!

Organ class got ten minutes in the Saturday morning program. Earlier in the week the children selected the registration they liked and decided on which manuals to play. They then located and played the pedal for the tonic note of their pieces. For the demonstration performance, we had the organ at the twelve-feet-from-the-chancel position and turned it around so the children's backs would be to the audience. We lined up as if we were going to Communion. Or do basketball layups! I drew stops. Each child played his piece and finished with a sturdy 16' pedal tonic, then slid off the other end while the next child was mounting the bench. We made it! "Pink Panther" was last! I held my stopwatch—I had told them I'd stop them at 45 seconds so not to be surprised. I had to interrupt only one, and wouldn't you know that piece was in the dominant at that point and her ending pedal tonic made no sense at all. Oh well.

Those kids were a hit! The adults about swooned and the other children were in awe. One of the camp's co-directors remarked several times that our little camp had really come a long way for, in addition to the classes one might expect, we now have a band (instrumental choir) and a *pipe organ class*! The other co-director now wants to have pipe organ class as an elective next summer on a par with art and handbells (a 50-minute class every day)! What a switch! (I really don't see how, for the worship space will still be busy all the time—except during lunch!) People chuckled over those dangling legs they could see through the bench and how they suddenly had a mission and played a big loud pedal note. The children were so supportive of each other and had so much fun, I don't think anyone even thought about stage fright!

Immediate fallout: One of the eight, who is twelve and a half and is in the seventh grade this fall and who had dropped out of piano for a couple of years, has resumed piano lessons again. Yea! That's a 12.5% return, right? Pun intended!

Down the road, hopefully, these children and the 135 other campers, their siblings, parents, relatives, friends, the 35 camp staff adults, and 20 teenage assistants who heard them play will have a kindly feeling toward the organ and feel somewhat vested in it. Perhaps they will realize that it is not so esoteric and remote as to be unreachable. I wasn't promoting the organ as a worship tool but as a beautiful sounding, versatile, exciting, accessible, and, above all, enjoyable and inviting instrument.

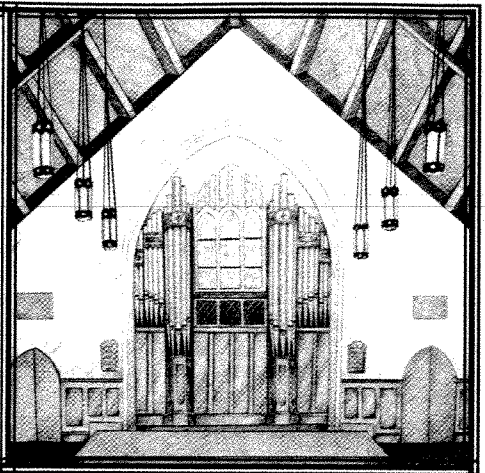
I washed off the keys but haven't wiped out the memories! Here's to next summer at Grace!

Beryl Bell Elwood received a bachelor of arts degree in public school music from Sterling College (Kans.) in 1956 and a master of music degree in organ performance from the Catholic University of America (D.C.) in 1976. Her teachers include Jan Chiapusso, Henry Gibson, Leo Lawless, Dale Krider, and Daniel Roth. She has played and directed choirs for Protestant churches from Colorado to Istanbul and has been organist at Grace Episcopal Church, Orange Park, Fla., since 1996. She is a past dean of the Potomac AGO Chapter and is currently a member of the Jacksonville Chapter.



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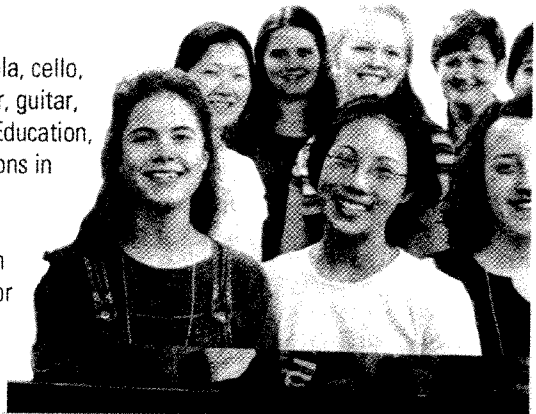
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