

REACHING CHILDREN WITH THE ORGAN

A PROJECT OF THE WICHITA AGO CHAPTER

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What began as a mission to get young people interested in the organ has become a major project for the Wichita AGO Chapter. At an informal discussion, most of the chapter members could remember a childhood experience with the king of instruments. They remembered being fascinated with the pipes in a church and with the variety of sounds the instrument made. In looking at the various elementary music series used in the local classrooms, there was practically no mention of the organ. The families of the orchestra are stressed and there is information about the piano, but the organ is seldom mentioned and there are only a few examples of organ music in the recordings that accompany the series. That realization led former dean Irene Shaw to develop materials about the organ to use in music classrooms in the Wichita area.

A committee was formed that included four elementary and two college teachers. They developed a format for the initial unit. A performance by John Leavitt of his "Hymn Preludes for the Church Year" for the KMEA convention appealed to Irene as a work that students would relate to. Dr. Leavitt agreed to the inclusion of a recording of his performance in the unit. The pilot project was used in eight classrooms. The teachers suggested that a live demonstration would be helpful. A video of an organ demonstration helped viewers learn about the construction, operation, and sounds of the organ. The next effort was a videotaped organ crawl. Chapter members Carole Pracht and Shirley Wiebe performed on an instrument that allowed strategic camera shots and visual illustrations of a script Irene moderated. This ten-minute production presented information about the organ and allowed the students to hear major organ works at the same time. Those first efforts were shown to chapter members after a Guild meeting to elicit reactions. All were excited and lent encouragement to the initial efforts.

The next step was enlisting the chapter to help with the young people's concert effort in both financial and program support. So with some reservation, Irene presented major ideas to the chapter board for the 1992-93 programs. What happened the next year surprised all the members and almost overwhelmed her.

Irene developed a unit to be used in the classroom. The unit included worksheets, musical vocabulary instruction, a paper organ to be put together by students (designed by the Choristers Guild), and information about what the local chapter was willing to do for the teachers and schools. After contacting the local school district music coordinator, arrangements were made for an in-service session to inform local music teachers about the organ unit. In the meantime, another tape of organ music was recorded for teachers to use in the classroom. Ken Shaw was drafted to be the recording engineer and cameraman for future events. The tape was available for a minimal cost for the teachers to use in the presentation of the organ unit.

At the in-service session, classroom music teachers were asked if they would be interested in field trips to local pipe organs. Robert Town from Wichita State University volunteered to present sessions on the Marcussen organ in WSU's Wiedemann Concert Hall. Sub-dean Bill Racer also conducted several sessions for students at area churches. The performers presented about ten sessions during the past year.

The majority of students taking part in the field trips were third to fifth graders. Some



Students from Mueller Elementary School visit Marcussen organ at WSU

students read a prepared introduction for the sessions. A variety of music and methods of presentation were developed for the listening and concentration level of those attending. Groups ranged from 20 to 80 students. One seventh grade wanted to participate. Dr. Racer included a piece students played in their band for his performance. The students sang songs on which the demonstration works were based and then variations of those pieces were played. The art teachers provided students with material on stained glass and a discussion of the windows in the church continued that study. The session became a real interdisciplinary learning opportunity for those middle school students.

In some sessions, students were able to go into the organ chambers; they were really excited about seeing the mechanisms of the instrument. In others, exposed organ pipes were there for students to see, and several old pipes were used to illustrate concepts such as pitch and timbre. Some sessions included such ideas as how to listen to a fugue or a theme and variations, the four families of sound in the organ, and music from different countries and eras.

Before the performances, the teachers were sent packets that included some of the fugue subjects, songs to be learned before coming to the sessions, and tapes of some of the works that were going to be played. Two pieces that were instantly received were the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* (Bach) and an arrangement of "Carol of the Bells" because students knew them from movies they had seen. And, of course, the students wanted to touch the instrument. With proper supervision, even this was encouraged. Some piano students played a piece they knew on the organ.

The Wichita Chapter was hoping to commission a work for its 40th anniversary. Dr. Leavitt was asked to write a work especially designed to appeal to children. Irene pushed the chapter to present an organ concert similar to the children's concert played each year by the Wichita Symphony Orchestra. The board decided to ask Dr. Leavitt to play that recital and to present his work at the same time. The result was *Scenes of Childhood* based on poems from Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses." The work was received with great enthusiasm by the children at the concert. *The Wichita Eagle* supported the chapter by printing an article that informed the community of the Guild's efforts to interest more students in the organ.

Teachers were given evaluation forms to critique the presentations. Their comments will be helpful in planning future programs.

Presentations have had enthusiastic response from teachers, and the program continues to grow. About 200 students were involved the first year and nearly 1,000 the second year. The POPS project will interest some students to play the organ and also build the listening audience for the organ. Irene stated, "We grow to appreciate that which we understand. We want children to fall in love with the pipe organ."

Some of the objectives of the POPS project were:

1. To make children aware of the uniqueness of the pipe organ;
2. To arouse curiosity about the organ and its music;
3. To excite students about the variety of sounds and music the organ can produce;
4. To learn about the organ's historical development;
5. To present organ literature that students can understand and enjoy.

Where is the children's Pipe Organ Project (POPS for Kids) going? Next year, the Guild will present Todd Wilson in February, playing a concert for the chapter and a children's organ recital the next morning. The Guild pays for the project by charging each student attending \$1, and that small fee encourages student ownership of the program. The Guild will send teaching materials related to the concert to the teachers to help students prepare to be good listeners. The Guild will also sponsor the Wichita Community Children's Choir at its May meeting. This program will include works for the children to sing with organ accompaniment and a performance of John Leavitt's work. The Guild is excited about the results of its effort and especially of Irene Shaw's constant encouragement and leadership of the Children's Pipe Organ Project.

How effective are the efforts? One goal of the project was to provide the opportunity for children to hear a real pipe organ. A letter from Tyler told us we had achieved one goal: "It was a real treat to go and see a real pipe organ being played. This was the first time I got to see or hear a real pipe organ, so I just thank you for letting it be possible." Alicia wrote: "When I grow up, I want to be an organ player." Interesting youngsters in the organ is the first step in extending our profession. The Wichita AGO Chapter is working hard to do so.

More information can be secured from Irene Shaw, POPS Chairman, 316 Cardinal Lane, Wichita, KS 67213. Classroom units are \$5; videos, \$10; organ tape, \$4 (plus \$6 handling charge). John Leavitt's *Scenes of Childhood* cassette and video will be available next fall.