

AN INTERVIEW WITH PARLEY BELNAP
by James Welch
Organist at Santa Clara University, California

JW: **When and where did you serve a mission for the LDS Church?**

PB: I served my mission from 1950-1953 in Germany, and it was called the East German Mission. It consisted of three districts in West Germany (Hanover, Kiel, and West Berlin). The mission home and office were in Berlin-Dahlem. East Germany had missionaries from East Germany, but Americans were not allowed to serve there. To go to Berlin we either had to fly or take a military train from the West to West Berlin. The name was later changed to North German Mission in order to avoid any political suggestions. My mission was for 2½ years.

JW: **I understand you studied with Marcel Dupré. Can you tell me about this?**

PB: Near the end of my mission, I wrote a letter to Marcel Dupré and asked if I could study with him; and he accepted me as a student. I went to Paris in the middle of March, 1953, and met Dupré at his home in Meudon, outside of Paris. He said that he was going on a concert tour and would be back in three weeks. He assigned me to memorize the Toccata, Adagio, and Fugue in C Major of Bach. I studied with him for about 4½ months, during which time I memorized over one hundred pages of organ music. Dupré always congratulated me on my memory work. He had a four-manual Cavallé-Coll organ in his 200-seat organ studio, with two nine-foot grand pianos. It was a marvelous experience!

JW: **I know you served in the military at some point. When and where was this?**

PB: I was drafted into the army in 1956 and sent to Ft. Ord, California, for training. I was then sent to Pirmasens, Germany, as a clerk typist and assigned to the Pirmasens Elementary School, which had grades one through nine. This school did not have a music teacher, and so I was assigned to teach the choir. We learned and performed an operetta entitled, "Tom Sawyer," written for children.

JW: **You've spoken frequently of your time with Flor Peeters. When did you study with him?**

PB: I made contact with Flor Peeters when I was in the army in Pirmasens, Germany, and was able to go every so often to Belgium to study with him. I had permission to leave the base Friday evening, traveled all night by train to Belgium, had my lesson on Saturday at 11:00 a.m. at Flor Peeters' home, then traveled all night on Saturday and was back for church services on Sunday. It was hard to find enough time to practice while in the army, but my studies with Flor Peeters allowed me to receive a Belgian-American Educational Foundation scholarship for further study with him from 1958-1960.

I attended the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp in the organ class of Flor Peeters and also took private lessons at his home every other week. The organ class was held on Tuesdays and Fridays for three hours each time. We were all expected to play, and we all received help from Flor Peeters and two of his wonderful organ assistants. It was challenging but very helpful.

JW: I remember that in the Fall of 1968, Flor Peeters came to Provo and gave a recital at the Provo Tabernacle. I still have the program with his autograph!

JW: **I wrote my dissertation at Stanford on Albert Schweitzer's recordings of Bach's organ works, but that was after he had passed away in 1965. I know you actually met Schweitzer in person. Tell me the details of that meeting!**

PB: In 1959, while I was studying in Belgium, an LDS missionary in Belgium by the name of Tom Winkel told me that he wanted to go on a tour down to France. (They allowed that sort of thing in those days!) So he and I rode together on a motor scooter to France. One of the places we visited was Gunsbach, the Alsatian hometown of Albert Schweitzer. We found the house. I wondered if it would be too presumptuous to knock on the door, but I did it anyway. His nurse answered the door, and I told her I was an organist. She told me that Schweitzer was actually at home at that moment, in between trips to Africa. He had visitors at the house at the time—they were having a belated birthday celebration for him—but he asked that we be invited in anyway. He then spent 45 minutes with me in his study. I remember talking with him about the organs he had played throughout Europe. What a memorable experience!

JW: **I know that the exams in Belgium were very rigorous in those days. Tell me about them.**

PB: In 1960, I passed the examinations and received the First-Prize Diploma in organ with honors. The first exam consisted of preparing and performing thirty Bach chorales, ten from figured bass, ten with soprano and bass only, and ten with soprano only. We had to improvise on a given theme, for which we had thirty minutes to think through what we would do. We were also required to play a major work of Bach. Roman Catholic students were required to accompany a given Gregorian chant. The second exam was a recital a month later, including a major work of Bach which had to be learned within that month's time. It was challenging but very worthwhile.

JW: **Did you pursue an additional degree in Belgium?**

PB: I came home and in 1962 married Bona Belliston in the Salt Lake Temple. We made plans to return to Belgium to work on the Hoger Diploma in organ, which is the highest diploma given by a conservatory in Belgium in organ. We left on December 27, 1962, and I worked on this degree with Flor Peeters at the conservatory in Antwerp. We lived at the LDS Branch house in Brussels.

My mother passed away May of 1964, and I went home to Utah for the funeral. As I left, Flor Peeters said to me, "When you come back to give your final recital, you will play this for your mother." I received the diploma in June of 1964.

JW: **You spent some time at the Hyde Park Chapel in London, if I am not mistaken.**

PB: I was appointed at this time to be the Hyde Park Chapel organist by the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. We left right away for London after I played and passed the recital exam for the Hoger Diploma in organ. Robert Cundick had been the Hyde Park organist before, and the pattern was set to play six recitals a week. I played until about the middle of September, 1964.

JW: **When did you begin teaching at BYU? What other degrees did you pursue?**

PB: In September of 1965, I began teaching at BYU. I studied with Marilyn Mason at the University of Michigan for two summers. Subsequently, I studied at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where I received a DMA in organ in 1975.

JW: **When did you retire, and what interesting things have you done since that time?**

PB: I retired from BYU in 1998 and then served at the Jerusalem Center from January 1998 until July 1999, playing 32 mini-recitals each week for the many visitors who came to tour the beautiful Center. I also managed the Sunday evening recitals by Israeli artists. These recitals were started by Robert Cundick and have become a "must" for Israeli musicians.

In 2003, I had the privilege of returning to the London Hyde Park Chapel—this time on an LDS mission. We were assigned to the Hyde Park Family History Center, but I also trained people to play the fine organ in the Chapel. Before we left for London, Robert Cundick suggested that I start concerts in the Hyde Park Chapel such as the concerts in the Jerusalem Center, which the area presidency approved. The four major music conservatories in London were invited to send their most accomplished students to perform in a weekly concert series. These recitals, featuring various instrumentalists and vocalists as well as organists and pianists, provided a pleasant venue for wonderful, merging artists to perform.

JW: **Thank you for sharing these stories with me. They make me want to know "the rest of the story!"**

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