

## **My Memories of J. J. Keeler**

by Rulon Christiansen

My recollections of J.J. Keeler go back to the mid-1960's when we lived in Clearfield, Utah, where my father taught music at North Davis Junior High School. J.J. Keeler's daughter, Mary Ann and her husband, Boyd Jolley, were our next door neighbors. Both of my parents and also my aunt had studied with Keeler: my father, organ, and my mother and aunt, piano. So since he and my folks were very well acquainted, he had a standing invitation to come over to our house and see my parents. I was somewhat intimidated by his rather stern personality and looks at the time. Dad was always asking me to play the piano or the organ for about anyone who came to our house, so I probably played for Keeler at this time.

I began studying organ with him in the summer of 1967 at BYU in the Harris Fine Arts Center. I remember my second organ lesson for which he had assigned me to work on the *Andante Religioso* from the *Fourth Organ Sonata* by Felix Mendelssohn. I practiced it in the practice rooms at the school but also in the piano practice rooms in the basement of my dormitory. I practiced the manuals on the piano and pretended to play the pedals on the floor. When I played it at my lesson he was pleased—he said that it took some students seven or eight weeks to learn it.

Keeler was a very technical, methodical teacher. He had me go through his organ method, Basic Organ Technique and Repertoire. He assigned me several pieces I had learned when studying with Robert Cundick the previous year: the *Prelude in C major* from the *Eight Little Preludes and Fugues* of Bach; the *Gigout Toccata*, Karg-Elert's *Now Thank We All Our God*, the *Prelude, Fugue* and *Variation* and *Pastorale* of Cesar Franck, among others. Keeler required his students to use the Bornemann editions edited by Marcel Dupre. The fingering and pedaling of Dupre was very methodical because it involved all aspects of organ technique—some of which I had never been aware: division of the inner parts between the hands, and thumb glissando. This had three forms, White to White Key, Black to White Key, and White to Black Key.

Like Schreiner and Cundick, Keeler's instruction stressed legato technique and organ staccato and repeated notes. His marks were mostly manual changes, breath marks at the ends of phrases, and articulations such as staccato. He also explained agogic accents. His articulations were a combination of legato and staccato, especially for Bach fugue subjects but also for other works such as the *Finale in B-flat* of Franck, and for the *Prelude, Fugue, and Variation*, which he phrased a lot in the right hand (more so than Dupre indicated). In fact, Keeler indicated much more articulation than in the Dupre edition, which was mainly

legato with staccato dots above all repeated notes. It is said that Dupre played all music the same, legato and staccato, and for Franck, too strict of a style in many cases, according to organist, Michael Murray. I don't think we did any *leggiero* or continuous detachment except in the Widor *Toccata* in my six years of study with him. His style consisted of legato and staccato, breath marks and manual changes, plus added ritards for rubato and "give" which he thought was more effective if a piece wasn't played too slowly.

Keeler held Albert Schweitzer in high esteem musically. He thought that his interpretations of Bach, particularly were artistically valid. He also thought highly of Schweitzer's interpretation of Mendelssohn, Franck, and Widor. He often stated that Schweitzer was a master of the swell pedal. I think that he wrote to Schweitzer in Lambarene, Africa, where Schweitzer had created a hospital for the African natives. He may have sent money to Schweitzer for the hospital. He often spoke about Schweitzer's philosophy and ethic, "reverence for life." Schweitzer had studied with Widor and collaborated on the Schirmer Edition of Bach organ works. This is commonly referred to as the Widor-Schweitzer edition. But Widor didn't advocate reeds in Bach except the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, and in the Bach *Cathedral in E Minor Prelude and Fugue*. Schweitzer, surprisingly, adds and subtracts the reeds very often, making one wonder how

much Widor actually contributed to the edition. Also, Schweitzer makes constant manual changes. He also advocated small phrase groupings, like violin bowings. Widor advocated either legato or staccato, according to Vierne, and he also was against constant stop changes, that he called the "magic lantern" or *Lanterne magique*. Therefore, once again it seems odd that Widor would endorse a style of playing with constant manual changes and stop changes. Also, like Vierne, Schweitzer made use of the swell pedal. Keeler had me use the swell box in one piece of Bach only—the middle part of the Bach *Fantasy in G Minor*, where there is a chromatic, modulatory section. Most preludes and fugues were registered simply, beginning with Foundations 8' and 4' (for Bach fugues, mostly) and then adding the higher-pitched stops such as 2 2/3, 2', mixtures and sometimes the reeds at the return of the theme, or at the conclusion.

Schweitzer was a proponent of the preservation of early organs, as in those played by Bach, and others, in Germany, for instance, where mixtures are much more plentiful than reeds. Thus stated, once again it is hard to understand why he would make the statement "since the advent of Cavaille-coll (with a preponderance of reeds and for the most part, few mixtures) came the true playing of Bach." Keeler had a recording of Vierne playing the Bach *G Minor Fantasy*, and he used the swell in the same place.

Keeler's phrasing in Bach came from Karl Straube, teacher of organ at the Leipzig Conservatory, and also Music Director of Bach's former church, St. Thomas.

The only Bach piece that we ever did with many registration changes in it was the *Passacaglia in C Minor*, which he "orchestrated" with at least two dozen changes of registration ostensibly to highlight the differences from one variation to another.

Keeler had a colorful sense of humor. He loved spoonerisms, puns, and enjoyed making the most ribald jokes out of the commonplace. When a student needed more practice, he would tell him to "get off your axis and start rotating." When he felt that it was time for a pupil to lay a piece aside, he would say that we would "put it on the back burner." To save the loud stops for the climax of a big piece, he would say "don't shoot your wad." In Reger's thick-textured music, he often said that it had to be thinned out, or "pruned." If one played too fast, he would often say "where's the fire?"

I only heard Keeler play in public once or twice. Once was when he was a guest speaker talking about church music in a sacrament meeting in the Syracuse, Utah, Stake house. He spoke and then played one or two organ solos, pieces from

his repertoire book, in particular, his transcription of the Schubert song "Litany" which he called "Supplication." I remember watching him play that piece, and was impressed watching his pedaling. He prepared every pedal note in advance, many times using the gaps, the spaces between the groups of two and three black pedals. The piece didn't look difficult, but it was played very well, and Keeler never looked once at the pedals. Schreiner never had me use the gaps, and I later learned that he despised the practice.

The other time that I heard him play was at the Church Music Workshop at BYU, when he spoke in the Madsen Recital Hall. This would have been in the early 1990's. He spoke and then played an improvisation on a hymn tune, which one I can't remember. It was well done, but was very conservative, and displayed a perfect adherence to the rules of voice-leading and doubling, but was rather more conservative than adventuresome. But it was a pleasure to hear his very classical, correct improvisation because it displayed his great knowledge of music and theory.

I remember one incident that is worth relating. We organ students shared the duty of playing the organ for BYU Tuesday devotionals in the Smith Field House, that was before the Marriott Center was built. It was my turn to play, so I

went there and opened the organ and got ready to play; when to my horror, I realized that I had forgotten to bring a copy of the LDS hymnal. I talked to someone who was in charge, and they called Keeler. They told me that he would meet me at the top of the stairs leading down the hill to the Field House. I raced there as fast as I could and here came Keeler running as fast as he could to give me the copy of the hymnal. I can still see the look of desperation on his face, as he knew that it wasn't just my neck on the line, but his also. After that, he told me that it took him some time to get over the strain this caused him physically.

I heard him perform on tapes that he had made of his recitals in the Joseph Smith Auditorium, where the Austin Organ was moved from the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1948 when the new Aeolian-Skinner was installed in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. As I recall, the only piece that I remember him playing was the *Toccata* from the *Gothic Suite* by Leon Boellmann. It was very well played and exciting. Little did I know that I would play this instrument when the ward that I was in met in the auditorium. Or better yet, that someday the teacher who fired me, Alexander Schreiner, would invite me to play recitals in the Salt Lake Tabernacle!

Keeler and I became very close friends and colleagues the last 10 or 15 years of his life. We used to call each other once or twice a week and chat and go to dinner with our wives, particularly at Prestwich Farms restaurant in Orem, the Little America Hotel restaurant in Salt Lake City, and the restaurant at the Ogden Golf and Country Club. Several of his students played recitals, either at the Episcopal Church where I was employed as Music Director (a half-time appointment). He became a surrogate uncle to me, my own uncle and I never getting very close. He had a very broad outlook on life and wanted to instill in his students a desire to do their best and to be good organists. He was a really wonderful influence on my life, and even though I studied back East for my doctorate at the Eastman School of Music my teaching style is very much in the Keeler tradition. I enjoyed my six years of study with him, culminating in my Bachelor degree in 1973, and my Master of Music degree in 1978. When I was studying for my Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Rochester, New York, he used to call us late in the evening, forgetting to remember that we were two hours later than he was in Utah.

He was a kind and generous teacher, who could be demanding but in a civil way. He didn't count mistakes like Schreiner, and I feel that he is the greater



teacher. His influence on my life is great. I was privileged to be invited to speak at his funeral in 1996, along with fellow pupil, Bonnie Goodliffe, representing his fifty years of teaching students. I know without a shadow of a doubt the he still lives and still watches over us from a more lofty station. His works do follow him.