

My Memories of Alexander Schreiner

by Rulon Christiansen

My memories of Alexander Schreiner date back to over fifty years ago. I had heard him play on the Tabernacle Choir broadcast, so I was familiar with him. I had seen a program on KUED TV in the late fifties in which he played several solos in the Tabernacle. Included on this program he performed the Widor *Toccata*. This was the first time I had ever heard this number, and I was swept away not only by the beauty and excitement of this technically demanding composition, but by Schreiner's interpretation of it. One thing that stunned me was the uncanny way he reached down and pulled up his pant leg in between the left-hand chords without skipping a beat. From then on I developed an obsession with the piece, and it was the deciding factor in wanting to become an organist myself. I also began listening to his radio program on Thursday evenings and remember hearing him talk about Louis Vierne and then playing the *Carillon de Westminster* for the first time.

I studied with Schreiner at two different times, first in 1960 for about five or six months and again in 1963 for about three months. My first lessons with him are indelibly engraved in my mind. My mother had recently lost her father;

and my father, a church organist during World War II in the Army, thought that taking organ lessons with Alexander Schreiner would help take her mind off her father's passing. We decided to take lessons with him, sharing a lesson, my father, mother and I each receiving 20 minutes of the lesson. My mother was the most advanced, working on pieces such as *Dawn* by Cyril Jenkins, *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring* and the *Fantasy in G Major* of Bach, and Schreiner's own *Lyric Interlude*. I think she also played the *Suite Gothique* by Leon Boellmann. My father mainly studied pieces in Schreiner's Organ Voluntaries, such as a transcription of a piece by Schumann. He already played the organ with a good legato, having studied for two summers at BYU with J. J. Keeler, with whom my mother had studied piano. I was in the sixth grade at the time, so it was my first experience learning to play the organ. I remember vividly studying the *Eight Little Preludes* of Bach and other pieces such as *Fountain Reverie* by Fletcher, among others. The lessons were taken in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square, both on the three-manual pipe organ in the hall and in a studio on another three-manual instrument at the rear on ground level. The bottom manual of this organ didn't play.

Dr. Schreiner had a dynamic personality. He was generally in a pleasant mood at lessons, rather somewhat sober and serious as we played, but could also

be quite humorous—a real bon-vivant and life of the party. Most of the time he was patient with me, but on occasion he became impatient. I had on a green paisley shirt with $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves that I rolled up. On this day I was the only one to take the lesson, which was at seven a.m. on Saturday morning. My sleeve kept coming down so I kept rolling it back up. Finally, rather exasperated, he reached down and rolled up the sleeve himself! He could be good-natured and paternal, slipping a piece of Brach's candy into my hand while one of my parents played, telling me softly to wait until after the lesson to eat it. He would give me small metal organ pipes to take home. I remember that they were rather small, about six- or seven-inches long and would bend rather easily. He talked frequently about coming to America as a boy of eleven years of age, of having a second-hand suit because his parents couldn't afford a new one. He also talked about keeping your shoes polished, and of Marcel Dupre coming to the Tabernacle with beautifully polished shoes. His appearance was somewhat wizard-like, with thick wiry eyebrows and an expressive face that easily passed from smiling and beatific to solemn and on some occasions, rather impatient and temperamental, as has already been stated. He had long, thin fingers with black hair on the knuckles and light blue eyes.

Schreiner as a teacher was dynamic, conducting and even singing the melody of the pieces, standing next to the console, singing the notes on the syllables “dee” and “dah.” He wore black Red-Wing walking shoes with a rounded toe which he told us were not good for organ playing.

Since my mother was doing so well owing to her piano studies at BYU, Schreiner took her to the Tabernacle to play the organ. He took me over to the Tabernacle to do something, but I didn’t get to play the organ.

I recall studying several pieces with him at the time, such as preludes from Bach’s *Eight Little Preludes and Fugues* and Percy Fletcher’s *Fountain Reverie*. He would stand to the right of the console and conduct me—standing erect to project the majesty and grandeur of louder pieces such as the *Prelude in D minor* and *Prelude in G minor* of the *Eight Short Preludes of Bach*. I remember him telling me to get my left hand ready to play in place before beginning to play in the opening measures of the C major prelude, when I was leaving my left hand beneath the manual, and then moving up to play at the very last minute. This prelude begins with the right hand playing alone.

Dr. Schreiner had the habit of “sniffing” to indicate the release of repeated notes or the ends of phrases. He threatened to strap my knees together in order

to play and locate the pedals by feel, by the compass method, keeping knees together to measure various intervals between the feet. He also taught me that it was possible to play two expression pedals with the same foot. I remember him telling me to take big breaths at phrase endings in the left-hand melody of *Fountain Reverie* and during the diminuendo at the end, saying poetically that this was like a boat sailing out to sea from the harbor. He told me, to my disbelief, that he thought that I was better than he was at the same age. Had I only known how nationally famous he was at the time, and such an artist as I did later, as a touring virtuoso, I would have wondered how he would even think of teaching a beginner like me.

He was more interested in interpretation than technique. He would mark my music to indicate phrase endings in the manuals, some ties and accidentals and quite a few pedalings, but rarely any fingering. No manual techniques were covered, as he assumed that one should already be able to play in legato style. He was more concerned about pedal technique, using Henri Libert's pedal exercises and Studies in Pedal Phrasing by Dudley Buck, whom he referred to as Budley Duck, in a humorous spoonerism. He also stressed position at the console and in pedaling, advising us to sit back on the bench and lean forward for comfort and support and playing on the big toes and middle of the heels. Later I was to

learn that he despised the use of the gaps in pedaling, as in the Stainer organ method, instead preferring the system advocated in the Gordon Balch Nevin organ_method.

During my second period of study with him, the pieces studied included Louis Vierne's *Prelude and Andante from the First Organ Symphony, Clair de Lune* by Karg-Elert, the *Cathedral Prelude* of Bach in E minor, the *Toccata on Weymouth* by Francis Snow (whom Schreiner said was a nice man), and *Thou Art the Rock* by Mulet. He gave me the phrasing indication that Widor used in his *Toccata in F*, as he was a pupil of both Vierne and Widor. He connected the slurs in the first page of the right-hand part on the Vierne *Prelude*, to make them longer phrases. This is in the style that other Vierne pupils taught in Paris where I studied with Gaston Litaize the summer of 1976, and later with Andre Fleury, another pupil of Vierne in December of 1986. He also added pedaling and marked accidentals. Instead of playing seconds or thirds in the center of the pedal board (heel-toe of the same foot), with the heel on the nearest pedal key, toe on the farthest pedal, he often preferred using the toe for the closest pedal key, and the heel for the pedal key farthest out from the center. Very frequently, he would play descending fourths, from the lowest G or F to low C on the pedal board with the left foot only, heel on

the G or F, and jumping to the low C with his toe. He did this fast enough so that there was no noticeable break in the pedal line.

For manual technique, he very rarely indicated fingering, such as for a whole-tone scale in the right hand on the ending of Karg-Elert's *Clair de Lune*. He stipulated that the left foot should also pass under the right foot when pedaling. He didn't teach organ registration at the lessons. Having a PhD in composition with Leroy Robertson at the University of Utah in 1954, he would sometimes edit pieces to make them more unified musically in terms of form, or eliminating extraneous or trite passages. This he did with the *Melody of Peace* by Carol Martin and the *Toccata on Weymouth* by Francis W. Snow. He practiced the "Widor slide" in pedaling, where you put your foot back and then slide forward on the long pedal keys, instead of just pushing them down. I have seen John Longhurst play the pedals like this when he played recitals as a faculty member at BYU (Longhurst also studied with Schreiner). He taught that Widor wanted the first two right-hand notes of the *Toccata* played like they were, slurred, the second note staccato, in each of the cascading sixteenth-note patterns throughout the piece. For the Mulet toccata, *Thou Art the Rock*, he stressed learning it a few measures at time, indicating metronomic marks from slow to fast as one became

more familiar with the piece. Schreiner said that when he played this piece, his son would say that it was a "ferocious" piece!

He emphasized rhythmic playing, that the first three important things about music were rhythm, rhythm, and rhythm as he asked me in one lesson. He also didn't take that many rhythmic liberties in his playing, following the example of Vierne. This was also true in Chopin and Rachmaninoff on the piano. He also stated that there is an unwritten law in music that when you come to the end of a piece you slow down. He thought that Vierne should be played rather metronomically, compared to Franck, where more judicious use of rubato and a freer and more improvisatory style is in order. This was confirmed by Andre Fleury who studied with Henri Letocart, a pupil of Franck. Franck even played Bach with a freedom that was in vogue at the time, but a bit on the exaggerated side.

Schreiner had mixed views on the tremolo, which he called the "trem-o-lo-lo-lo." He stated that he didn't use it on any professional recitals outside the Tabernacle, but used it on the "sign off" music at the end of the broadcast and on his Tabernacle recitals on such pieces as his *Lyrical Interlude* and *Woodland Flute Call* by Fannie Dillon. I think part of this tremolo use came from his days as a theatre organist, where the tremolo is used all the time.

He abhorred the use of the sforzando on the Tabernacle organ, and had it disconnected after Virgil Fox came to the Tabernacle and played full organ for an extended period of time. He prided himself on being able to play an entire recital with only the crescendo pedal. For most fast movements and French toccatas, he would just use the crescendo pedal to add the reeds, as opposed to having several general pistons set in a build-up like ventilis to add the reeds on a French organ, such as those by Aristide Cavaille-Coll. He used the bells on the melody of the *Carillon de Westminster* even though not marked in the score. Andre Fleury said that he didn't think Vierne would approve of this.

Alexander Schreiner suggested I take more piano during this second period of study with him, and he "fired me" as a pupil. I studied piano with Frederic Dixon for almost five years, and he developed me technically and had me memorize all the pieces we studied. He had been a pupil of Rafael Joseffy in New York. Joseffy had been a student of Franz Liszt in Weimar. I was crushed that Schreiner told me to drop organ and study piano exclusively, but he heard me play ten years later and was extremely happy with my progress. He stated that I had played wonderfully well and that my left hand was just delightful (*Toccata*, Durufle Suite, op.5.) He then said, "Now wasn't that the best advice I could have given you?" Schreiner was a good teacher but better as a teacher for advanced

students where he could concentrate on interpretation. But at times he could be downright intimidating. Like when I was studying the *Prelude* of the *First Symphony* of Vierne. He reminded me and took me task when I made mistakes, saying "mistake number 1, mistake number 2 " and so forth. That is why when he motioned for me to come down after I played, I thought surely he was going to bite my head off. I was shocked when he complimented me. Incidentally, he had nothing but praise for Keeler as a fine organ teacher.

His technical ability was remarkable as was his coordination and ability to multi-task. I remember him swatting a fly with his left hand, in between the left-hand chords in the *Water Nymphs* of Louis Vierne as he dedicated the new organ in the Syracuse, Utah, Stake house in 1962. He also recorded his radio programs in one take, changing the music on the music rack while improvising an impromptu script without any notes. His improvisational ability was great, having studied it with Louis Vierne in Paris, the lessons divided into the three (3) twenty-minute periods, the first on Bach, the second on Vierne's works, and the third on improvisation. This included improvisation of andante movements with a development section as well as the difficult study of fugal improvisation. He demonstrated this ability by improvising an organ solo to fill up dead-air space at

the end of the Tabernacle Choir broadcast (that became *Lyric Interlude*, with the addition of a middle or B section.

Once during a summer broadcast, he improvised the second half of the Dupre *Prelude in B Major*, when the wind blew the music off the rack, the windows of the Tabernacle being open to alleviate the hot temperature of the Tabernacle. As a youth during a performance of the Gershwin *Rhapsody in Blue* in a theatre in Salt Lake City, the pianist jumped up and ran backstage. The conductor motioned to Schreiner to go to the piano and take his place. He sight-read the *Rhapsody in Blue*, successfully, never having seen the score before, saving the day.

Alexander Schreiner is the greatest organist I have ever heard, and my model for technique and excitement in organ playing. He was the inspiration behind my becoming an organist. Other organists may have excellent technique, but he surpasses them in the grandeur and majesty, and a formidable manual and pedal technique which he always put in service of the music, and never for mere technical display. He performed on smaller instruments and when questioned about it, said that he didn't need a large organ, just a good performance.

He was a great performer, and a good teacher, even though his main focus was as a concert artist. My thanks to my former pupil, Daniel Berghout, for publishing his marvelous doctoral dissertation, Alexander Schreiner: Mormon Tabernacle Organist, and making it available to the public. Schreiner's legacy as carried on by his pupils and other organists is truly great.