

Keynote Address-UVAGO Super Saturday, April 27, 2019 at BYU
An Organist's Journey: from middle C to high C and back again!

My musical beginnings came on a piano bench at age 5. I remember coming into the room and putting my quarter on top of the piano and sitting down next to my teacher. We were living in Chicago at the time. We were in the last throes of World War II with victory on both fronts yet to come that summer and fall. My father was an FBI agent with German language skills that he acquired on his mission during the 30's. He translated German documents and chased saboteurs and spies across the country, but he was working out of the Chicago office as I began my journey into music. He was also a singer and a violinist with my mother as his accompanist. Both played well and my fondest memories of childhood were those of falling asleep at night to the sound of my father singing or playing the violin with my mother at the piano. I wanted to be like her.

I don't remember my first piano teacher very well...only that she was nice and I enjoyed my time with her. She introduced me to the joys of playing John Thompson. By the time I was 7, the war was over and my father had been transferred to Santa Fe because of it's proximity to Los Alamos and the Manhattan Project. And, of course, I had a new piano teacher. Her name was Lorena Sager. I remember her as a little old gray haired spinster lady with an old fashioned "grandma" house. The dining room had no table and chairs, but instead housed two pianos, one a huge upright where the student sat and next to it was a black concert grand where she sat....except during our yearly recitals when WE got to sit at the grand piano to play for our parents.

She was an incredible teacher and eager to feed her students with knowledge. We did not do John Thompson or Hanon or Czerny, but Loeschhorn and Burgmuller.

By the time I was 11, I was asked to be the accompanist for the 7th grade choir at Harrington Jr. High. From that one beginning, I became the accompanist for the choir in every school I attended, every year without skipping one, through Jr. High, Santa Fe High School, West Phoenix High School and Arizona State University, where I studied with Patricia Keating, who launched me into Chopin, and Mozart, Bach's Well Tempered Clavier and Brahms exercises. I auditioned for music scholarships at ASU with Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue in it's entirety- 23 minutes long! The choir accompanist at ASU was graduating and I was awarded 3 scholarships to come and be the new choir accompanist and finally realize my dream of being a music major at Arizona State, just like my mother. I had just turned 17.

Although accompanying the choir began at age 11, by the time I was 13 I was playing keyboard in a dance band. It was still early 50's, the war hadn't been over that long and the big band sound was still in, especially the music of Glen Miller and Tommy Dorsey. I was the only girl in the band...the rest were guys from the band at Santa Fe High. I was a freshman....they were seniors. I had taken the place of a graduating senior from the year before. I had a ball....and I do mean musically!

At age 15, I worked on my first theater production. We did Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado" my sophomore year. I played for all the rehearsals, sang on stage in the chorus and understudied the part of Yum Yum. So much fun.

While at Santa Fe High I played in the school orchestra. During my Dad's missionary years in Germany, he had purchased a wonderful violin there. Then Dad decided he wanted me to learn to play it. I took what lessons we could find and played in the school orchestra,

appropriately named the "Tipica Orchestra" that was really only a very large Mariachi group. I sawed away on that fiddle to all kinds of the greatest Mexican music with guitars and marimba and mandolins and trumpets and fiddles and dancers with castanets and had the greatest time of my life. After a while, I begged off from fiddling around and asked to take over the marimba. After all, it was only some huge rosewood keyboard that you hit with mallets. How hard could that be? So I did !

All of my musical experiences during those first 19 years of life were to give me training in the things that were to come in my adult life. Each event, each new learning opportunity, paved the way for what came next. I decided to tally up how many different choirs or groups for which I've been the accompanist for over 60 years, and the present number is 28. I didn't count church choirs of any kind....too many. Then I tallied up how many theater or Opera productions for which I've been the rehearsal or performance accompanist and the number is 31.

BUT, this is an organ workshop and when am I going to tell you about the organ? I didn't forget. I just wanted to first establish my beginnings, for they played an important role in my life as a organist and continue to do so, even today. The learning continues even now, but those years were my prerequisite learning years and have been woven into the fabric of my life.

One such learning experience came without benefit of a formal learning situation. It was the summer of 1952 and I had just turned 12. In those days, summer was actually 3 months of doing nothing. There was stick ball in the street or jacks on the porch or marbles in the back yard dirt, and an endless parade of paper dolls but we generally just raced around playing hide and go seek and generally harassing our mothers. There was no TV. ..a new invention few owned at the time. Then my mother announced that if we did our chores by 10 am (and did them to her satisfaction) we could do whatever we wanted for the rest of the day. I hated housework and I still do, but somehow something clicked with me and I tucked in and got my chores done and proceeded to sit at the piano and play all day long....every day. Of course, there were specific piano pieces to be practiced but the rest of the time I played my mother's music. I got out a huge stack of her music and just played. Of course, they were poorly played but I was having a good time and my sight reading skills started going right over the top. I spent the entire summer just sight-reading and it changed my life. Not just my sight reading was affected, but all of my basic keyboard skills were also affected.

As for the organ, I have since thought about how my musical life has been a journey. For me, taking a journey involves getting on a train. I can see myself sitting on a seat by the window and watching the scenery as it goes by. There are stops along the way, and they represent the various learning experiences we have from time to time, both small and large. Coming from Arizona, the journey always has a desert scene outside the window. Sometimes our stops along the way are short. Maybe there is only a water tower and maybe a shack that sells drinks and flour and cornmeal. The question is, are you sitting there buried in a book or taking a nap, OR do you jump off the train and run to the shack to see what's offered. Maybe you didn't know that the man there had received a box of citrus from Yuma and he had made a huge barrel of lemonade. You put down your dime and rush back to the train with some lemonade . You are now refreshed and rewarded for your efforts. Sometimes the opportunities to get off and learn are larger and you come back to the train with strawberry lemonade, or mango peach lemonade with Ginger Ale and an orange slice. Or maybe it's cherry Dr. Pepper

and the jolt of caffeine just makes the experience explode with excitement.

Right here I have to throw out these questions. Are you aware of the engineer? Who is guiding this train on this journey of yours? Hmmm. Can you tell? Keep that thought in mind.

My organ story is simple and familiar. I was just turning 16. My father had been finally transferred home to Arizona and assigned to the big office in Phoenix. I was in the middle of my junior year. I had transferred from a small high school in Santa Fe to a very large high school in Phoenix, yet I no sooner arrived than the accompanist for the school choir had some health issues and had to leave and I slid onto the bench without missing a beat. (It helped that I had met the choir director at Church my first Sunday in town). So, here it comes. We had been there about 6 months when the Bishop asked me to be the Sunday School organist because he had heard that I played the piano well. Sound familiar. I did accept the calling. I was clueless, so I said "Why not!" It sounded interesting. I had never even heard an organ, nor seen one until we moved to Phoenix. Our congregation in Santa Fe had been so small that we didn't even have a building of our own and we rented the Fellowship Hall of the local Episcopal Church. They had an old upright piano in the hall. I didn't even know there was anything else.

The sum total of my instruction for this new calling was how to turn on the organ. It had two funny looking switches. It was an old Hammond. For those who don't know, there are no stops to pull with names of flutes and strings, etc, but instead it has numbered draw bars. I had no idea what to do. But someone gave me an old Lorenz book that was beat up and coverless with pieces in it entitled "Sunset" or "Communion." And it had a little grouping of numbers listed at the top of the page and if you followed the numbers in sequence for your little draw bars, you then could play that sound. So, I just followed the numbers. Then I noticed that when I played, the sound kept stopping every time I lifted a finger. Hmm. I guess you have to hold the keys down. But then you run out of fingers. Now what? And then, there's this big keyboard under my feet. I'm supposed to play that also? Well, I did...a note here and there. It was OK. Of course, I had to take off my high heeled shoes. They kept getting stuck between the keys. My nylons were slippery, but what else could I do.

Well, from my inexperienced viewpoint and my inexperienced ears, I thought I was doing fairly well. I least I played all the right notes and seemed to accompany the congregation fairly well and I was enjoying myself so I just kept going. After all, it was just another keyboard...or three of them, actually, if you counted the big one below. Within a few years, another organist in my Stake told me she had heard that you were supposed to wear shoes to play those foot pedals. Since she didn't know what they were talking about, she purchased a pair of leather slippers with a leather sole and a flat heel with elastic around the top. They folded in half and fit in a tiny little plastic bag. Well, if she was doing it, so would I. And I did. I thought it was better than my stocking feet, but what did I know. My train was just chugging along and I was enjoying the ride, watching the great views outside my window and taking advantage of every opportunity to get off for some lemonade.

I can only think that what happened next was a time when the train was eased onto a sidetrack while we waited for cars to be shuffled about. By the time my car was re-coupled and back on track, I was going in a different direction. I was now 26, married, mother of 3 little girls when also 26 yr. old John Longhurst, with a newly acquired Masters degree in organ from the U came to Phoenix on assignment from Salt Lake to do a series of 6 weeks of organ training. Still clueless, I signed up for the advanced lessons. There were 3 or 4 in our group. Most of us were clueless. We should have signed up for beginning classes. Undaunted, John

taught us what we needed to know. I discovered real organ shoes! I discovered families of stops with principals and flutes and strings and reeds. I discovered finger substitution and finger independence and the THUMB GLISSANDO. I discovered manual and pedal exercises, and I actually learned how to play a hymn!! No doubt about it. This was a cherry Dr. Pepper event. I was so totally excited !

With a growing family, we couldn't afford for me to take privately, so I started haunting the Phoenix Public Library for anything written about the organ. I didn't understand most of it, but I didn't care. I read it and took notes. I actually started buying music. First it was Schreiner's Organ Voluntaries...one volume at a time. Then I was discovering that someone named Robert Manookin had some books called Hymn Preludes. I started with volume 1 and kept going. Then we received guidelines from Salt Lake City and there was one blue book for just the organ, written by Alexander Schreiner. I took to heart whatever Schreiner advised. I wore shoes....not Organmasters, but some Mary Jane's of my daughters that fit the description of what was needed in an organ shoe. It worked. I did the exercises. It worked. My train was just chugging along. The desert was in perpetual Spring bloom.

But the day did come when I knew I needed lessons. My husband agreed that it was doable and I found the name of a teacher and made my appointment for my first lesson....on Tuesday, February 11th, 1975. On Monday, February 10th, I walked into my bedroom and discovered that my husband of 14 years had died silently in his sleep during an afternoon nap. I was left with 5 children, ages 5 to 12 with a 6th one on the way. I canceled my lessons. My train derailed for a time. My new baby was born and found to be handicapped. That small growing child within had not survived the great shock to my system and there were now places where his brain had short-circuited. Nothing to be done about it. You just get back on the train. The engineer keeps it going. You don't really notice. You just ride. I couldn't even touch the keyboard for a month. Instead, my little ones and I sat on the very back row of the Chapel and just listened. I couldn't sing. I couldn't play. I just couldn't.

Eventually, I was back on the bench. Shortly after I was widowed, I was asked to play for rehearsals for some new thing by a fellow named Lex de Azevedo....something called "Saturday's Warrior"....some big production he was putting on in concert halls in LA, Salt Lake and Phoenix. I turned it down because I was pregnant and newly widowed. There was no room in my soul for any music except playing the organ every week. That's all. By Fall, I was better. "Warrior" had been an astounding success and Lex de Azevedo was already launching a new production to celebrate the country's Bi-centennial the following year... 1976. It was called "Threads of Glory." So when they called me again in the Fall, this time I got off the train and partook. I was back on track. The experience acted as a healing balm.

As I approached my 40th birthday, I learned that there was a group organ class being held at Phoenix Jr. College. It was a community class and anyone could enroll. So I did. The fee was nominal. I could afford this. I stayed for 6 semesters, and was introduced to Bach in all his varieties, Mendelssohn Sonatas, Brahms and Buxtehude Chorale Preludes, etc. And oddly enough, my teacher was the ASU choir accompanist that I replaced on scholarship back in 1957., Chalma Frost. She was the organist at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran in Phoenix. She remembered me . As a teacher, she fed me music as fast as I could learn it. I actually began to be excited again. A few more Cherry Dr. Pepper stops along the way. That's what she brought to my journey.

In 1982 our Arizona Mormon Choir had been invited to the Workshop on Church Music

held every August at BYU. We had been asked to provide one of the evening concerts. We couldn't bring 175 choir members with us, so we just brought our chamber choir of 40. I was one of them. With this event, I didn't even notice that my train was again easing onto a side track and that I was being prepared for a course correction. As a gift, our chamber choir was invited to attend any of the classes free of charge. So I brought my organ shoes and music, and walked into an organ class taught by James Welch. He breezed into class and blithely asked if anyone had a Bach Prelude and fugue to play for him. No one moved. I noticed that no one had on any organ shoes but me. I raised my hand. He looked shocked and invited me to the bench and we worked over the prelude and fugue I had been learning for Chalma. That was the beginning.

Within a year of that meeting, I had sudden inspiration to go back and finish the degree I had left behind when I married. My first thought was for the accompanying degree I had always wanted but it had not been offered at ASU in the late 50's when I had last been in school. However, another sudden inspiration turned me completely around and pointed me towards getting a degree in organ performance. Now, where on earth did that come from? How could I even think of such a thing. It was something that had never been in my mind, never been a dream to fulfill. It was something out of the blue. Within another year I had married off my oldest daughter, sent my second daughter on a mission, sold my home in Phoenix and taken the 4 younger ones to Santa Barbara where I enrolled as a returning adult in her junior year at University of California Santa Barbara, where James Welch was University Organist. There began the part of my journey that set my feet in the direction for which they had been primed since I was 5. It was while I was in Santa Barbara that I finally realized that I had been on a journey and that everything in my life had led me to this point and time.

I stayed for 8 years, finishing my Bachelor's and also doing a Masters. I earned my living playing the piano at San Marcos High School, and vocal classes at UCSB and doing theater work on the side while I played the organ at all of the local churches as a substitute, finally settling in at St. Andrew's Presbyterian. I also still played in the Ward and Stake. I joined the American Guild of Organists. I took my turn in each office, including Dean. I sat for my AGO Colleague exam and passed. I entered an annual organ competition held in Pasadena and joked when my fellow student who went with me won money, but I won experience. More lemonade! I started going to AGO conventions, both Regional and National. We played recitals quarterly at school and always played in members recitals for the AGO. We went on organ crawls to LA and to the Bay area several times. We went to the Romantic Organ Festival at University of Redlands. We went to the Bach marathon held in Memorial Church at Stanford University in honor of Herb Nanney. We flew to Salt Lake City for the first American Organ Symposium at the Tabernacle. We went to organ concerts in LA at least once a quarter. It was just like a Chinese Immersion program, except it was the organ and the language was music. When I say "We", I am talking about Jim and his students. Some went, some did not. Some got lemonade and some did not. I also took advantage of an opportunity to go to East Germany 4 yrs before the Wall came down and walk in the footsteps of Bach for 3 weeks. While there, I found myself crying one day at the sheer overload of information coming my way. Some of the more senior organists on the trip hugged me and said they had been there once and it would pass. It did. I was OK. More lemonade....and sometimes Cherry Dr. Pepper.

When it came time to leave Santa Barbara, going home to Arizona didn't feel right. My

train had pulled off again, awaiting to be coupled to a different one going in a different direction. The new journey brought me here to Springville. And lo and behold, I moved into the house next door to Lori Serr. And the rest is history. She introduced me around at AGO, and at the Workshop on Church Music. That Fall we did a dedicatory recital together for the organ in our new Stake Center. By the following summer I was an organ instructor alongside Lori at the Workshop on Church Music at BYU. Except for 2 or 3 by years, I have taught at the August workshop at BYU since 1993. I have participated in Super Saturday every year since its inception. I even did my bit by being Dean for our Utah Valley Chapter of the AGO and took a turn at being treasurer. I got myself involved in accompanying again at vocal studios, primarily the studio of Ewan Harbrecht Mitton, which led me into opera and theater accompanying. I accompanied many vocalists in their recitals or competitions as well as doing choir accompanying in the schools. It has been hard to say whether I'm an organist or a pianist, but I have enjoyed every moment. It has been the journey that I was meant to take and I have had a lot of lemonade and Dr. Pepper along the way. I'm an ordinary person...a very ordinary person...and a very shy one, but one who simply was willing to take advantage of any stop along the way, to take advantage of opportunities when they arose....to trust the engineer as he steered the train, coupled and uncoupled the cars and provided me with the appropriate stops and refreshment along the way.

Now the sunset years of my life are beginning to emerge. Arthritis has set in. Playing any keyboard has become harder. Being mobile is becoming something that tries my soul. But I'm still making music. I'm still learning new music. I'm still doing recitals and pushing myself to discover what I can do and becoming content with what I cannot do. So, after all that, what is my message to you today? I'm glad you're HERE. It thrills me to see that you got off the train for some lemonade. We each are on our own journey. What is yours? Are you trusting the engineer? Are you reaching out for your share of the lemonade? My journey began with that first day on the bench in 1945, when I watched avidly as my teacher pointed to the key in the middle and said "that is middle C. Notice how it is nestled next to this group of two black keys. Can you find other C's on the keyboard?" Middle C is where everything begins, because everything that follows blossoms outward from that one key in the middle. Pretty soon you have learned enough to soar clear up to high C. But the day comes when you start working your way down the keyboard back towards middle C again. But think of all the music you can make while you're on that journey up and down the keyboard.....including that big keyboard under your feet. There is never a time or place for giving up. You just keep moving up and down the keyboard, keep riding the train, keep getting off for some lemonade, and it all works. I know. The engineer knows. I just wanted you to know, too. See you around the lemonade stand.