

The Boston Musical Intelligen

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

Lee Eiseman, publisher; Robert Levin, advisor; David Moran, assisting editor; Bettina A. Norton, emerita editor

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MAY 24, 2017

Expiation and Organs

by GEOFFREY WIETING



C. B Fisk (company archive)

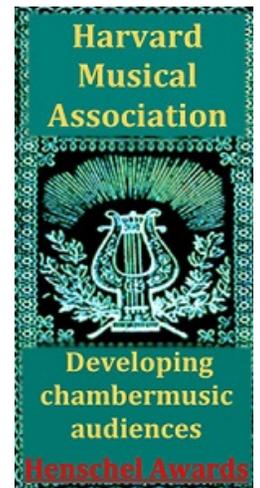
With the recent worldwide renewed apprehension about the potential for a new round of nuclear proliferation, the lecture-performance “Hell and Reason” at Old West Church Boston on Sunday by writer Laura Sewell Matter and organist Christa Rakich proved timely and topical. Their title is borrowed from an editorial by Albert Camus published after the bombing of Hiroshima in August 1945. “This isn’t a plea anymore, but an order that has to rise up from peoples to governments, the order to choose once and for all between hell and reason.” Matter’s essay, published this spring in the *Georgia Review*, is part of her book-length biography still being written, of the great American organ-builder, Charles Fisk (1925-1983), while Old West Church is the venue for one of his most celebrated masterpieces, Op. 55 (1971).

Some who know and admire Fisk’s organs have remained unaware of his early involvement in the Manhattan Project, but others, at the opposite end of the spectrum, have subscribed to a mythology that has grown up around it: e.g., a brilliant gift for physics placed him in the elite inner circle around J. Robert Oppenheimer. Matter provided a

significant service simply by separating the plain facts from the urban legends, but this was only the foundation for a deeper examination of the strategic, political, and moral debates about the building of weapons of mass destruction. Equally important, the lecture considered how Fisk’s Manhattan Project experience influenced the evolution of his career, ultimately steering him away from academic physics and into organ-building. Rakich chose pieces from the French and German Baroque that not only aligned closely with the emotional and intellectual thrust of the lecture but “[gave] Charlie a voice in these proceedings, too.”

The event opened with *Récit de Tierce en taille* by Nicolas de Grigny (1671-1703), a subtly beautiful and characteristic sound of its time. The *terce* is a “mutation” stop, i.e., one that reinforces an overtone other than the principal pitch or the octaves above it, blending different harmonic colors. Here the solo line (*récit*), placed in the tenor voice, lent a new hue and a hint of complexity to the cool, clean simplicity of Fisk’s 8-foot foundation stops. This contemplative work, which Rakich gave a natural flexibility, supplied no premonition of the weightier drama to come, both in Fisk’s personal history and the performer’s remaining selections.

Matter made clear that Fisk’s role in the Manhattan Project, which began in February 1943, was that of a technician, interpreting schematic diagrams, soldering, constructing electrical circuits at the University of Chicago. A benevolent uncle, Joyce Stearns, who really was in the inner circle of scientists, had procured this assignment for his not-quite-18-year-old nephew to shield him from the draft and likely combat duty. Moreover, it being wartime, Fisk was kept in the dark about the larger goal of the project and how his work fitted into it. This enforced ignorance continued even when he was transferred to Los Alamos in July 1944. After the successful Trinity test a year later and the destruction of Hiroshima, he discovered the awesome power of the device to which he had made a tiny contribution. At this point, he still felt he could best make a contribution through physics research and teaching, but several years later, having dropped out of a PhD program in physics and apprenticed himself to an organ repairman, he felt more suited to building and



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repairing organs. [Over lunch in the 70s, Charley explained the [mathematical, moral calculus that led him to atone for his wartime work through an almost religious mission of organ building. Dividing the number of dead in the blasts by the number Manhattan project workers, he explained, would yield the fraction he had killed as if with his own hands. F.L.E.]

J. S. Bach's chorale prelude *Vor deinen Thron* (Before Thy throne I now appear), BWV 668, is reputed to be the last piece he wrote, on his deathbed. Rakich rendered it with poignant penitence, a lovely, plainspoken registration, and a particularly moving final phrase. Though the chorale's text is clearly the remorseful plea of one hoping to atone for past sins ("turn not Thy gracious face from me, a poor sinner"), Matter made clear that interpreting Fisk's change of career direction as an act of atonement for contributing to making the first atomic bomb is, at minimum, a drastic oversimplification.

The second part of the lecture dealt mainly with the making of Fisk's reputation as the foremost American organ-builder of his generation. Though the arms race continued unabated through this period, his part in the drive to build the first atomic bomb, though not entirely forgotten, was of secondary importance at most. After his premature death in the early 1980s, when the Cold War was perhaps at its height, Fisk's work in Chicago and Los Alamos became a topic of renewed interest, with a number of stories, printed and spoken, embellishing the truth for the sake of a good yarn. The diverse perspectives on his career trajectory rather parallel the many viewpoints about the possession of thermonuclear weapons and under what circumstances they might be used (if at all).

The closer, de Grigny's *Point d'Orgue sur les Grands Jeux*, unleashed the power of the titular "big stops". While it might be a stretch to liken the sound to "the force and decisiveness of the first atomic bomb," the *grand jeu* does have an impact and gravity unexpected from what is only a medium-sized organ, as well as a distinctly French Baroque color from its chorus reeds and cornets. In essence, a much-extended plagal cadence, the *Point d'Orgue* in Rakich's hands had both majesty and a quasi-oppressive (though not unmusical) weightiness anchored by powerful, lengthy pedal points. Again, an inspired choice of repertoire in the context of the lecture's subject matter.

This joint presentation implicitly reminded us that while the Fisk firm continues to build and install beautiful new organs around the world, nuclear-armed countries, in turn, are building new weapons of mass destruction with the power to destroy all culture, civilization, and life itself many times over. It is certainly a (you should pardon the expression) pipe dream to think international unanimity on nuclear proliferation could ever be attained, but it seems obvious that we must strive to form a consensus that these bombs (and indeed all weapons of mass destruction) not be used under any circumstances. The musical and verbal talents of Christa Rakich and Laura Sewell Matter, and their interest and knowledge about both phases of Charles Fisk's professional life, made "Hell and Reason" a compelling argument, stimulating both heart and brain.



Old West Fisk (file photo)

Geoffrey Wieting holds Bachelor's degrees in organ and Latin from Oberlin College and a Master's degree in collaborative piano from New England Conservatory. He is a freelance organist, collaborative pianist and vocal coach. He sings with the Back Bay Chorale and serves on the Board of Directors of the Old West Organ Society.

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