

Commentary/Editorial

Max B. Miller

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Max B. Miller. Another of my teachers is gone.

In January of this year I received word that Max Miller had died at the age of 85. Now with his death and the death last March of Heinz Wunderlich, I have lost the remainder of my major organ teachers. I studied organ with Max for three years while I did my graduate work at the Boston University School of Theology. He was not only my organ teacher, but my major professor and during my second and third years, I served as his Assistant Organist and Choir Master at the B.U. Chapel. He entrusted many of the daily chapel services to me and under his direction I got basic experience for running rehearsals and services in a busy seminary setting. I also had unlimited access to the chapel's three manual organ which allowed me to practice at the school instead of trudging down to the School of Fine Arts.

Max was probably the best all around organ teacher I ever had. He was fluent in all schools of organ repertoire and encouraged me to play pieces that I might not have ventured to play if faced with the choice by myself. He was unflappable and I seldom had an opportunity to see him upset. One of those rare times was one Sunday morning, something was wrong with the Swell keyboard and he decided that he could fix it himself. Lifting the top keyboard somehow, he managed to spring all the keys so that they were sticking out every which way. It made it impossible to play on the Swell manual, but somehow he managed the service on just two keyboards despite his ire at himself.

Another incident which showed his wisdom, happened during my third year. Anti-Vietnam war protesters were taking over public buildings in what they called "sanctuaries". Protesters took over Marsh Chapel, along with two AWOL soldiers, and filled almost every nook and cranny. The seminary continued to hold morning chapel services, often with people sleeping in the pews or behind the altar. I fully expected that Max would lock up the organ console to protect it from protesters. However, he left the console unlocked and let those who wanted to play noodle around on it. His logic was that then they would not break the lock and lid trying to get into it. To his credit, he was right; neither the organ nor his office sustained any damage. That is, until the FBI came to get the one remaining AWOL soldier and they broke down the heavy oak door to his office where the man was hiding.

Max made one prediction about me during my study with him. I was planning, at that point, to go into the full time music ministry. In my pipe dreams I imagined a fulltime music position in a large urban church, so it came as rather a shock when he said he could image me doing something like. . . oh, organbuilding. It stung a little, although I soon realized he was not knocking my playing, but recognizing my mechanical abilities. It turned out to be a good prediction as, in addition to my church jobs, I spent nearly 35 years building pipe organs.

I remember my study and friendship with Max with great fondness. And, the time at B. U. was made more pleasant by working with him. It was for my second graduate recital that I worked with Max on the a minor Chaconne by Johann Nepomuk David. I have performed the music again in the last couple years, actually

with one performance last Sunday, and it is with a sense of nostalgia that I look at notes that Max made in my music. I actually have a page of performance notes from his note book taped in the back of my music so it is almost as though he was reaching across the years.