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### Gerhard Krapf: Musician, Organist and Composer

The complete organ works of Gerhard Krapf (b. 1924) form a compendium of music for the life of an organist. They range from easy service music for preludes, offertories, postludes and hymn playing to excellent teaching pieces, music for organ and other instruments, organ with voice and solo concert works.

Gerhard Krapf is Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada where he was professor of organ and related subjects from 1977 to 1987. He is a Canadian citizen and continues to live in Edmonton with his wife Trudl, in part because he loves the climate and the close proximity to the Rocky Mountains.

Gerhard Krapf's musical life and career have included performing, teaching, writing about music and composing. I had the opportunity to interview Gerhard Krapf at his home in Edmonton in May, 2000. Our conversation included some fascinating biographical details, a discussion of his organ works and wise thoughts on the organist's vocation and church music. It was a privilege for me to study with Professor Krapf at the U of A (DMus, 1988) and I have long enjoyed playing, performing and teaching a wealth of his organ compositions.

Quoted below is Gerhard Krapf's biography as it was printed in the front cover of "Five Biblical Prayers" (SMP, 1977). The interview is followed by an alphabetical list of Gerhard Krapf's organ works and books. Most works are easily available; the Music Library of the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta houses the complete organ works.

Gerhard Krapf was born in the small German town of Meissenheim in 1924. After many years of piano and organ instruction, Krapf was drafted into the German army in 1942. He was wounded four times during the course of his military service, and he did not even know that the war had ended when the Russians captured him on May 10, 1945. Years of hard labor followed, and during this period of mental and physical agony, Gerhard Krapf began composing. Music paper was unavailable and even paper was in short supply, so he wrote his scores on old cement bags! Believing that his life would end in central Russia, he was eventually freed on July 3, 1948. By 1950, Krapf had completed his music education and received the *Staatsexamen-Diploma* in organ, choral conducting, and music theory in Karlsruhe.

Gerhard Krapf then came to the United States as an exchange student at the University of Redlands, where he received his Master of Music degree in 1951. His limited visa forced him to return to Germany, but he was able to immigrate to this country in 1953, attaining citizenship in 1959. He taught in Michigan, Missouri, and Wyoming prior to his appointment in 1961 as professor and head of the organ department at the University of Iowa.

In addition to his teaching, concertizing, and lecturing, Gerhard Krapf is the author of reviews, articles, books on organ and church music, and has also translated Hans Klotz' *Handbook of the Organ* and Werckmeister's 1698 *Orgelprobe*.

The journal *Church Music* stated, "Gerhard Krapf does not think of himself as a composer, but rather as a musician who happens also to write." As he says, "When I have something to say, I say it." His formidable catalog of works suggests that he has found a great deal to say. And a look into one of his scores will show that he says it with fluency and imagination."

Question: *Your biography is printed in several early editions of your works. It prompts further questions: what did you compose on the cement sacks? What musical background prepared you to begin in this way?*

Answer:

In one of the camps, near Ufa in the Ural Mountains, I formed and composed for a men's choir, but I had never had so much as one minute of instruction in music theory. It was kind of wild. They gave me cement bags and ink and the trouble was that it bled. I made some settings of 16th, 17th and 19th century *volkslieder* (folksongs). I wasn't a great composer nor did I have much inclination, time or energy. When one "came home" [to camp from work in the oil fields] he was exhausted. I had piano and organ lessons prior to the war.

Question: *Who were your teachers or mentors for composition?*

Answer: I did not really have any composition teachers. My first organ teacher was Friedrich Bruestle. Then Professor Wilhelm Krauss at the *Musikhochschule* in Karlsruhe took me on. He taught me organ both before and after I returned home from imprisonment in 1948, when he tutored me in theory, music history and counterpoint and prepared me for the [state] exam in 1950. He was a disciplinarian, unforgiving and tough but I was one of seven in a class of thirty who passed the exam. Paul Pisk at the University of Redlands taught me orchestration, counterpoint and advanced counterpoint. After that I was on my own and other aspects were self-taught.

Question: *How does composition fit with other facets of your musical life?*

Answer: I have thought of myself as a church musician, pure and simple, who must attain all the other skills a good organist has to master. Bach was my ideal. I thought of him as having produced top-notch music in a highly disciplined and highly self-critical way. I tried to emulate this attitude. I think as a church musician one is often preaching on a "non-verbal" level. Luther pointed this out using as example Josquin Desprez. He [Luther] said: "*Sic Deus praedicavit evangelium etiam per musicam ut videtur in Josquin*" ("Thus God has proclaimed the gospel also through music as seen in Josquin") and elsewhere: "the notes impart life to the text." That is actually what I thought of church music. It is a medium that helps congregations worship. It is not providing background aura for more or less spiritual entertainment. Everything I ever composed or played (and I still feel that way) I did in a theocentric way, in other words as a direct utterance towards God. What comes back is a reverberation. I have in mind Isaiah 6 where in a vision he saw the Lord. His train filled the temple, incense was wafting and the double choir of angels, seraphim and cherubim, shout to each other "Holy, Holy, Holy" [the Sanctus]. That is the picture I try to emulate.

Therefore, also, I am not shy in saying that what I wrote or what I played must be good, since I didn't do it for myself but as an offering to God it had to be the best I could do: a perfect sacrifice. In a nutshell these are my thoughts of church music. As Luther says, you have to preach in a way that the people can understand. Read their lips and see how they express things and that's the way you should express things musically as well. So the problem here, and I'm not sure I have entirely solved it, was always the doubt about writing so people could understand. Bach had that problem, lots of people had that problem; they ran away with the show and lost the congregation. The music became too difficult or unnecessarily voluble, or complex. If I look at my compositional style it started out (who!) with *Totentanz* as one of the first.

Question: *Could you talk about Totentanz and its unique place and significance in your compositions for [solo] organ? It seems to be the only published organ piece that is meant for concert use rather than for use within a liturgical service.*

Answer: *Totentanz* was the only piece not intended for playing in the service of worship. However, I felt and still feel conversely, that if you composed to the highest standards you could achieve, because directed towards God, it should certainly be good enough for concerts too. I have not made a distinction [between concert and service music] but I must say that most of my music is directed towards the service.

Textually *Totentanz* is somewhat like a hymn, a 17<sup>th</sup> century folksong. The idea has been around in German culture ever since the Middle Ages. *Ars morendi*, the art of dying, has for instance been represented in the paintings of Holbein; Liszt composed a *Totentanz* as did Distler and others. I treated this folksong very

much like a chorale prelude but allowed myself far more dissonance than usual. I did not restrict myself to a moderate level of difficulty or to easy intelligibility. That's why it is difficult and dissonant. Speaking of dissonance, I have always wanted dissonance to be the result of linear movement. *Totentanz* was written in Wyoming; we were in Wyoming from 1958 to 1961. I was organist in the Episcopal Cathedral in Laramie. When the Dean of the Cathedral, Jackson, heard me playing *Totentanz* for Trudl, he said "That's the way to take it out on your wife." So you see I was right in usually curtailing my stylistic "excesses".

Question: *Who were your mentors or teachers in the USA?*

Answer: My first published organ work, the Christmas Sonata, was dedicated to "Papa Pisk" who was actually much more than a teacher. He and his wife took us as family. The second sonata, Thanksgiving, was dedicated to Dr. Spelman, my organ teacher in Redlands; the third sonata, on Morning Chorales, was for my parents.

Question: *Your organ works range from short, simple hymn introductions and preludes, to lengthy and more complex partitas, sonatas and meditations. Your earlier works are the most dissonant and intense; your latest compositions are often more economical and more tonal. Did you make a conscious decision to make this shift?*

Answer: The shift happened gradually and subconsciously; eventually I began to realize it. I would say that I wrote the more demanding works, demanding from a listener's point of view, at the beginning of my career. There has since been a gradual shifting to unabashed tonal writing (in order to meet better the needs of today's congregations). I have never subscribed to the notion that a piece of music in order to be contemporary must do things that have never been done before.

The "Organ Vespers" contain the most dissonant hymn treatment I have done. The model was Bach again, the third part of the Clavierübung. I start out with a fantasia on a theme by Frescobaldi (but you wouldn't know it). The end is a fugue. Like Bach's E-flat major Prelude and Fugue, the Fantasia and Fugue are playable as one piece. Inside there are five hymn preludes and two congregational settings for each hymn, almost impractical because they are highly dissonant. The organ must never dominate; it should always accompany the congregation. I've done some repentance in the three volumes of hymn accompaniments.

Question: *Does your early use of dissonance relate to your experiences in the war?*

Answer: *Totentanz* addresses itself to my front experience; the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm composed in 1986 for Baritone Voice and Organ addresses itself to my imprisonment directly. The psalm is not a literal description of my experience in prison camp, but I have thought of it as a "mariner's psalm of life."

Question: *How do you decide on the style of composition?*

Answer: I think one can write within any style that one is comfortable with for the purpose of conveying specific content. I also subscribe to the notion that content determines style and form, and that truly musical composition is not capable of being represented verbally. If it were it would fare better with the literary branch of the arts.

Question: *How do you choose hymns, forms?*

Answer: Bach again. Bach, more than was generally recognized and realized, was a terrific hymnologist; he knew the hymns very well. Yet he could only choose one hymn per Sunday; clergy chose the others. The "Hymn of the Sunday" he would use for his major effort on the particular Sunday. I think he also wrote organ works for the service to hymns that wouldn't have been his choice. But he realized they were sufficiently often sung to need to have some organ preludes.

To be honest, my choices of hymns to earlier compositions and partitas have to do with what I considered to be musically fruitful melodies- contrapuntally inspired melodies of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Examples are *Mit Freuden zart, Lobe den Herren, Ein Lämmlein geht* (in memory of my youngest brother who had a fatal accident). For the partitas, sonatas and suites I have chosen hymns that I love.

But there are so many hymn tunes of “lesser quality” and often the pastor says “Next Sunday we’re going to sing such and such.” I should write preludes for these as well and I shouldn’t do it grudgingly, I should do my best. Examples of some of these are in the 6 volumes of the “Sing and Rejoice” series (SMP). The partitas, sonatas and suites were my own choice.

Question: *What about the non hymn-based works?*

I wrote the Little Organ Psalter, 7 pieces playable as an organ triptych and as an organ suite (psalm suite). There I have chosen some Biblical psalms and I wrote “alla Mendelssohn:” psalms without words. Even in free pieces I think of the service. Other examples of free pieces are the 3 Triptychs (CPH) specifically commissioned as service pieces (by the way, the 3 movement order reflects use in worship services as prelude, offertory and postlude); Five Pieces for Organ; two Fantasias at the beginning and end of “Music for the Service” (manuals only); Five Biblical Contemplations and “Music for Lent.”

Question: *Do you compose everyday?*

Answer: No, only when I have to say something. I like to do it on an even keel. There were times when I composed when I was totally exhausted; I still do that, but I stop sooner. Right now I’m working on volume 5 of Hymn Meditations for Dale Wood at Sacred Music Press.

Question: *Do you have advice for church musicians early in their careers?*

Answer: I think we could talk a long time on that one. To make it short. I think to be a church musician (in addition to being a capable musician) is a vocation. I’ve recently reread Ned Rorem’s article on sacred music, which he starts by saying he doesn’t believe in God. I think it’s a good thing to have these words “I don’t believe in God” at the outset of a discussion of church music; it puts the pistol to our head and makes us think. I think we live in a Godless time and I think an organist/church musician should be under no illusions; being a church musician is also like confessing the faith everyday, every time you play. I don’t think I would like to have played in church without any affinity to what the church is doing. At the very least, be a theologian first along with being a church musician. That is the first requirement I would make. The second requirement differs in no way for any musician; you ought to know your craft.