

The Life and Legacy of Arthur Poister

Workshop Presentation

National Convention of the American Guild of Organists, Houston, Texas
Tuesday, June 21, 8:30 AM, Hilton Americas Houston, Room 336 A-B

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UPCOMING POISTER BIOGRAPHY TO BE RELEASED LATER THIS YEAR:

David Pickering, *Arthur Poister—Master Teacher and Poet of the Organ*, published by Wayne Leupold Editions

Introductory Material:

- How many of the younger generation of organists really know who Poister was? Many now associate Poister's name with the Arthur Poister Scholarship Competition in Organ Playing
- Poister the Teacher: numerous masterclasses across the country
- Poister the Performer: particularly active from early 1930s to 60s, nearly 300 recitals
 - First American to perform the complete organ works of Bach in a series of memorized recitals (November 1929-February 1930 at the University of Redlands)

Poister's Background:

- Born June 13, 1898 in Galion, Ohio as the eighth of ten children
- Music was a family priority—Poister received fine piano instruction under Bessie Todd
- Poister's first church position: organist at Grace Episcopal Church at age fourteen
- Well-engrained work ethic:
 - Performed chores at home
 - Worked as bookkeeper and clerk after high school
 - Worked for Bishop William Montgomery Brown in high school: Bishop's demand for exactitude had lifelong influence
 - "I have always attributed any methodical sense which I may possess to him."
 - Arthur kept meticulous records of his students
 - Recorded all students' names, years, semesters, and institutions where studies occurred.
 - 796 university students
 - 42% studied with Poister only one semester
 - 78 private students
 - 874 total students
- Poister also had challenges and adversity
 - Outlived all of his siblings, four of whom died tragically young
 - His first wife, Mary Richards Jones, passed away on his forty-second birthday
 - Rejected as potential student at the Oberlin Conservatory due to "lack of talent"
 - Began university education four years after high school graduation but had to drop out after one semester due to lack of money.
- Early Organ Studies
 - First organ teacher was most likely his piano teacher Bessie Todd

- Studied with Edwin Arthur Kraft in Cleveland
- Studies and Experiences in Chicago (Summer 1920)
 - Studied piano with Josef Lhévinne and took a public school music course at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago in 1920.
 - During his time in Chicago, he heard about and applied for a Director of Music job at Central High School in Sioux City, Iowa.
- Years in Sioux City (1920-25, 1926-27)
 - Work with band, orchestra, and choir resulted greatly improved ensembles and increased enrollment
 - Poister began to realize his gifts as a teacher
 - Poister's work as a conductor resulted in his having organ students conduct their pieces to help with musicality
 - Served as Director of Music at First Congregational Church which housed a three-manual organ by Ernest Skinner.
 - Poister met Skinner in 1925 when he came to Sioux City to inspect his two instruments in the city.
 - Skinner heard Poister play and recommend he study with Dupré
 - Poister's wife, Mary, was also very supportive of this study. She was a gifted academic herself with a bachelor of arts degree in mathematics and chemistry
- First Year of Study with Dupré (1925-26)
 - Very intensive studies—eight hours of practice a day on a pedal piano
 - Dupré suggested studying the complete Bach and Franck organ works
 - Poister memorized two Bach preludes and fugues per week
 - Influences from Dupré
 - Weekly studio class
 - Playing from memory
 - Studies in improvisation and composition
- Second Year of Study with Dupré (1927-28)
 - Arthur and Mary felt it important for him to study one more year with Dupré before Arthur got any older (he was 29 years old at the beginning of this second year of study).
 - This second year of study allowed Poister to study more Bach and Franck in addition to studies of Dupré's own compositions.
 - Arthur also continued studies in composition with Dupré.
 - Arthur encouraged to apply for position at the University of Redlands since Dupré was consultant for the new Casavant organ being installed in the university chapel
- University of Redlands (1928-1937)
 - Poister's presence as a recitalist greatly increased during his years at Redlands
 - Undertook two significant recital tours in 1931 and 1932
 - Joined the roster of Colbert-LaBerge Concert Management in 1935
 - Playing extensively exposed him to happenings in the organ reform movement.
 - Poister was particularly impressed with Aeolian-Skinner's organs at Grace Cathedral and the University of Texas-Austin
 - Was eventually dissatisfied with his work at Redlands due to a heavy academic teaching schedule and being far from major musical centers and family.
 - Palmer Christian (University of Michigan) became a close friend of Poister's during this time and offered much encouragement
- Sabbatical in Germany (1933-34)

- Poister studied with Karl Straube in Leipzig, Germany. The studies almost did not occur due to political instability in Germany.
- Straube did not focus on technique. His primary interest was in musical playing, which influenced Arthur greatly in his teaching and performing.
- Ernest Skinner
 - Was a very close friend to Poister at the beginning of his professional career
 - Suggested studies with Dupré
 - Notified Poister about the opening at Oberlin Conservatory after he had only been at the University of Minnesota for a few months
 - Skinner's and Poister's ideas about organbuilding eventually parted company, but interestingly about one-quarter of all Poister's recital performances took place on E.M. Skinner organs
- Walter Holtkamp, Sr.
 - His views on the organ reform movement cast the longest shadow in Poister's career.
 - Poister initially did not agree with Holtkamp's ideas about organ reform, but after much talk and exposure to Holtkamp's work, he aligned his ideas with Holtkamp's.
 - The Crouse Auditorium organ (1950) was almost not built due to the university's insistence that other builders be consulted for proposals.
 - Holtkamp considered Poister a true friend and wrote him a letter indicating that he did not want the Syracuse organ project to ruin their friendship.
 - Holtkamp encouraged Poister to not "revert to being merely an organist" when Poister was considering giving up his work as Director of Music at Syracuse University's Hendricks Chapel
- Final Thoughts
 - Poister's persona consisted of two great loves—music and people.
 - The unique and special gift Poister offered was the wedding of a powerful musical presence with a human sensitivity that was real and not contrived, to the point of putting his family's and student's needs above his own
 - "Because he loved and was beloved he will not be forgotten." Roy Kehl