

AGO BOSTON 2014 COMMISSIONS

COMPOSERS DAVID LASKY AND CAROL BARNETT

David Tierny

This article is the fifth in a series to illuminate new music commissioned for the 2014 AGO National Convention.



INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LASKY

Your training is in musicology and organ performance. When did you start composing, and what inspired you to begin?

I would have to say that improvising during Mass—starting in high school and continuing in college—led to my first attempts at written-out composition. I was very fortunate to have had excellent music theory classes in high school; these helped me to prepare for the harmony and counterpoint classes that I would later take as an undergraduate music major. As I was learning a lot from studying the music I was playing, my first real efforts at composition came near the end of my undergraduate days; later, as an organ performance major in graduate school, I took an independent study course in composition, in which I wrote an extended, quite “modern”-style piece that was influenced by some of the music I was studying and playing at the time, namely works by Messiaen and Langlais.

As far as what “inspired” me to begin composing, I have always had a desire to be creative, and this desire manifested itself in a practical way by virtue of the *need* for one to be creative—to one extent or another—when being an organist in Catholic liturgy (and throughout my entire career, I have been an organist in *only* Catholic churches). That brings us back, then, to where it all started (and to what today, I believe, is my best skill as a musician)—namely, improvisation. In sum, with me, the improvisation informs the composition, and the compositional skills inform the improvisation.

Tell us about some of your other commissions for organ.

I’m very proud to have been commissioned, in 1994, by Marilyn Mason to write a work for her series. She specifically requested “Austria” as the tune on which the work would be based, and, as she did whenever she commissioned a work, she asked that a movement or section include a virtuosic pedal part. (I obliged her in this regard with

a “Gigue” movement for pedals alone, which, undoubtedly, “looked” much more difficult to play than it actually was!) The resulting work is titled, naturally enough, *Variations on “Austria,”* and was published with the erstwhile Randall M. Egan music company. Also, Jane Errera, longtime organist of St. Anne’s Church, Bethlehem, Pa., has, at various times over the past decade, commissioned me to write music for her use (either for church or recital, or both), and, in one instance, as a gift for another organist. These commissions resulted in *Variations on “Sicilian Mariners”*; *Four Reflections on “Jesu, Dulcis Memoria”*; and *Variations on a Polish Lullaby Carol*. In 2008, C. Dwane Grace commissioned me to write three separate pieces for the 175th anniversary celebration of Market Street Presbyterian Church, Lima, Ohio. This commission resulted in *Fanfare and Trumpet Tune on “Westminster Abbey”*; *Meditation on “Lac Qui Parle”*; and *Festive Postlude on “Thaxted.”* The Errera and Grace commissions were published by Augsburg Fortress. And, of course, you commissioned me, in 2011, to write a multi-movement piece for organ and oboe, to be performed as part of a scholarship concert for the Rivers School Conservatory, Weston, Mass.

For reasons that are not altogether clear, there is not a terribly large repertoire of music for this combination, so it was a real challenge for me to write idiomatically for the instruments *as a unit*, without much in the way of models. But, after hearing your performance with the fabulous oboist Andrew Price, I must say that, in all modesty, I think I succeeded pretty darned well! As of now, the work remains unpublished (it’s more of a concert piece than something that would necessarily enjoy much commercial success), although there may be a decent chance of publication with Augsburg Fortress in the future. And, if I may put in a personal note, I am always “tickled pink” to receive an organ commission!

How have your own experiences with new music for organ influenced what you have composed?

It all depends on what you mean by “new music!” I certainly am not ashamed to admit that I am conservative by nature and that I write almost exclusively for publication. And, for the most part, I write primarily for church use and not recital use (although the two are certainly not mutually exclusive in my music). With this in mind, I use more-or-less conservative techniques, albeit in a wide variety of styles, in order to ensure commercial success. I usually write organ music that is hymn-based, as this is what most publishers are seeking for their organ catalogs. I am most assuredly not a composer who writes abstract things that might get one or two performances and then are never heard again. I don’t look down on this approach; in fact, I’m envious of it, because in order to write re-

ally high-brow, serious, academic music that might get only one or two performances means that you are most likely receiving a very handsome commission to do it and that you are extremely gifted as a composer. I am *not* extremely gifted as a composer; rather, I am a gifted organist with some creativity and an ability to write idiomatically for my instrument in various styles that I hope are enjoyable or uplifting for an average congregation to listen to and, perhaps most important, are not too difficult for most organists to play. I do like my music to have enough compositional sophistication that it appeals to the more discriminating ear but is not so lofty as to sound “bad” and turn off a general congregation.

There are many fine composers working, or who have worked prior to their deaths, in the area of commercial church music—some of great fame and talent (such as Flor Peeters and Healey Willan)—who seem to adhere to such ideas as I have just outlined and who continue to be of influence to me. Among these are Charles Callahan, Michael Burkhardt, David Cherwien, Gordon Young, John Ferguson, and Paul Manz.

You have an impressive catalog of published music—and not just organ music but music for choir, organ, and solo instruments. How does your catalog reflect what you perceive your mission or responsibility as a composer to be?

That is an exceedingly thoughtful question! I think I touched on its answer in my response to your previous question. But, my, I have never thought about such lofty notions as my “mission or responsibility as a composer!” If I had, perhaps I would have written, or sought to write, more lofty music! I am basically a concrete, practical-minded man, and this is very much reflected in my music. As I previously indicated, I try, most consciously, to think and hear from the perspective of the nonmusicians in the pews of our churches when writing, and to not get too bogged down with making sure that concert-level organists will like and play my music (generally speaking). I am much more interested in writing music that makes the average or above-average organist (or choir, or both) sound good without burdening them with an undue amount of practice. (I even try to keep the registrations simple, and usually write with a two-manual organ in mind.) I always make absolutely certain that the music is written according to sound harmonic, contrapuntal, and voice-leading principles *and* that it appeals to all involved—listener and player alike—in a worship situation. It’s as simple as that!



ABOUT CAROL BARNETT

It seems as if Carol Barnett was destined to become a composer at the age of three when she would crawl up onto the piano bench in her father's studio after he had finished giving his lessons. Her father, like his teacher before him, required all of his piano students to compose, and now Barnett is one of Minnesota's leading composers, having been commissioned by the Minnesota Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Minnesota Music Teachers Association, and the Children's Theatre of Minneapolis. She has also received grants from the Jerome Foundation, the Camargo Foundation, the Inter-University Research committee on Cyprus, and the McKnight Foundation.

Barnett is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, where she studied piano with Bernard Weiser, flute with Emil Niosi, and composition with Dominick Argento and Paul Fetler. She was composer in residence with the Dale Warland Singers from 1992 to 2001 and currently teaches at Augsburg College in Minneapolis.

Her commission for the 2012 AGO National Convention is titled *March to Glory* and is based on the hymn "Draw me nearer." Her challenge was to write a composition for organ of modest length, useful in a church service. Barnett described the work as "a three-minute piece that starts off slowly and builds to a rambunctious march. It's not a work for beginning organists, but any reasonably proficient organist could do it justice . . . though it does require a three-manual instrument. It's a fun piece."

Barnett mused that when she was contacted about the commission, she thought, "This will be fun, and my sister lives in Boston." The commission offered Barnett the chance to write something different from what she has been doing recently, which includes a significant amount of choral music and a current commission writing for a big band. She admitted to listening to a lot of jazz lately, especially the music of Count Basie and Duke Ellington.

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