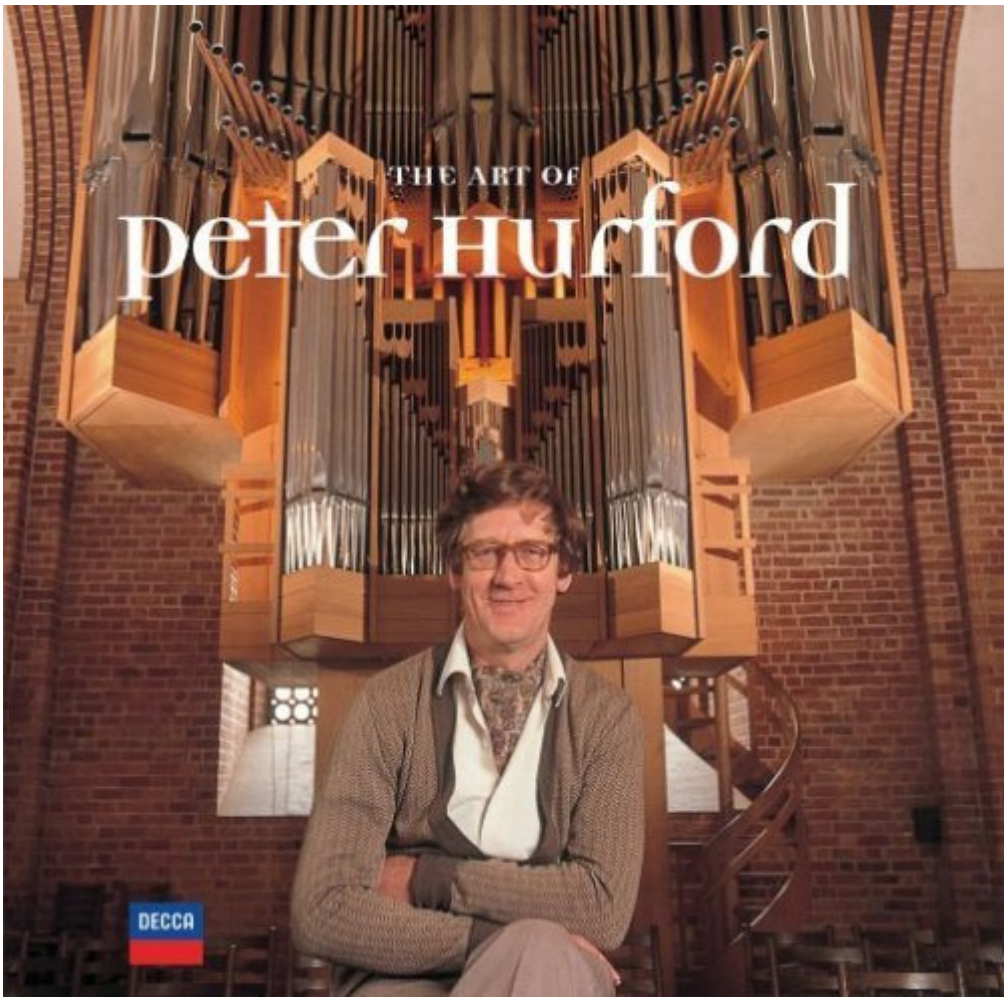
Organist Peter Hurford

A Conversation with Bruce Duffie



When I was in undergraduate school, there were — as there are everywhere — cliques of various sorts. Being a mixed group of musicians, the pianists spoke to one anther about repertoire, the wind people gathered to discuss band techniques, the string players huddled while speaking of bowings and the vocalists were always the most outwardly boisterous. There was some crossover, such as when a player or singer needed an accompanist, or if someone was forming a chamber group. And the dorm-situation often made for interesting combinations before most went into one or another Greek house. I myself (a bassoonist and historian) roomed with a timpanist, and next door were a pair from the same hometown who played violin and horn. You can see how the various threads often meshed to make a fabric... all but the organists!

For some reason, those who toiled behind those large consoles seemed to only chit-chat

amongst themselves, usually about registration. To the rest of us, registration was completely foreign and only necessary if you were another organist. Wind players helped strings with their singing tones, and vocalists often showed keyboard virtuosi the secrets of song-accompaniments. But those organ players seemed to have no commonality with anyone else. Sure, they were contacted whenever a wedding was being planned, and we certainly knew of their roaring thunder when we went to a recital, but that everyday bantering was just not there. No animosity, you understand; just no warmth and closeness that comes from sitting together in rehearsal detesting that guy waving the stick!

I must pat myself on the back and smile knowing that I actually helped several organists back in the day! Various tips and backstage scurries made their lives better and more interesting. Now that I am teaching the Introduction to Music course at Northwestern, each quarter I arrange a visit to the wonderful instrument in Alice Millar Chapel for a demonstration and observation session, which is one of the highlights of the term — or so I am told by the students themselves!

The organ is the biggest and most complicated instrument around, and can do so much more than just back up hymn-singers at services. It is special in so many ways, including the occasional use at symphony concerts where the pedal division is more felt than actually heard by the audience.

It is with great pleasure that I now present organist Peter Hurford as part of my ongoing series. This interview was held in 1990, while he was in Chicago for performances. I understood some of the general points about the monster, and tried to let my guest know that our conversation was not just a puff piece for the radio. He responded with thoughtful and complete answers, and made sure that his ideas were clear to those who knew the instrument as well as those who just heard it once in awhile.

Here is that conversation . . . . .

Bruce Duffie: You travel from place to place and organ to organ. How long does it take you to get used to a new organ and all of the registration and the sounds of the new space?

Peter Hurford: It depends on the size of the organ. For example, here in Chicago at Holy Name Cathedral, it's a very large organ. It's a four manual organ which has seventy-one stops. And it's totally mechanical action, so that means it has no buttons and no pre-set combinations. So I've got to spend a very great deal of time, because every stop that I choose I have to write it down on the music. I can't just set it electronically.

BD: Is that better or worse to have that kind of action?

PH: It sounds like a disadvantage from the way I was putting it, but in fact it's a great advantage when you're playing classical music.

BD: Why?

PH: The type of organ that is in Holy Name Cathedral is a Dutch classical organ. It's the sort of organ that's been built for the last two hundred and fifty to three hundred years in a straight line from classical composers. It has mechanical action which is the essential part of its construction, as far as the player is concerned. It's immaterial, really, whether you have a registrant to pull stops from time to time, or whether you have buttons to push them in and out electrically. What is terribly important is that the whole organ is conceived as a mechanical instrument. For the benefit of those who don't know what a mechanical action is, I should say it's exactly the same as a piano. The key action on a piano is mechanical. In other words, it goes straight from the finger, via a mechanical connection, to the tone source, which is the string. So the sound which is made by the string is a direct reflection of the movement of my finger. With a mechanical-action organ, the movement of the palette, which admits wind into a pipe, is the reflection of the movement of my finger in the same way.

BD: So you have more control of it in your hand?

PH: That's right. You have a tremendous amount of control over it. Of course it partly depends on the builder, because there are various styles of building. In some builders, you will have a more sensitive control over the movement of the palette, and therefore over the speech to the pipe, than you will with other builders.

BD: Coming back, then, to my original question, about how long does it take you to get used to all of these new things on each new organ that you meet?

PH: If it's a large classical organ, like this one, it will take me about eight hours of work, for an average length program. If it's an organ which is smaller, which has electronic aids — even though it might have mechanical action, it can still have electronic aids to move the stops in and out...

BD: Combinations?

PH: Combinations, that's right. If it has those, then that reduces the amount of time enormously, and I would probably imagine I would need only about four hours.

BD: So the eight hours is for setting up and deciding which stops you're going to use?

PH: That's right. A lot of it is that word — deciding. It's exactly that. It's making your mind up as to what sort of sound best suits the type of program you are doing. A piece of music requires a certain type of sound in order that its aesthetic may be fully projected properly. That's a very complex way of saying that a particular tune will be best served by a particular type of sound. For example, the well-known slow movement of Dvořák's *New World Symphony* has a lovely solo which is played on the *cor anglais*. Now that would sound totally different if it were to be played, shall we say, on a cello, and so the emotional impact of that would be less. On the organ it's exactly the same. One finds that certain music demands certain sounds, particularly French music of the very early eighteenth century — Couperin is one of the best-known examples. This music is actually orchestrated — I think that is not too strong a word — by the composer, and the title of a piece will tell the organist the sound which the composer recommends for that piece best to be expressed. It'll

be *tierce en taille*, for example, which means a *tierce*, a particular very beautiful sound, played *en taille*, in the tenor.

BD: Are these more than just suggestions?

PH: Yes, they are! From that period, they are instructions. So if you haven't got an organ which has got a *tierce*, for example, then you're a bit stymied! You wouldn't play that; you'd play some different music! But most modern organs have a representative, a sort of eclectic selection of stops, so that you can play most periods.

BD: Is the same kind of stop with the same label going to sound different in each organ to a certain degree?

PH: Yes, it will sound different, according to the building. The building is the biggest advantage or disadvantage to an organ — in fact to any wind instruments. We all know, for example, that if you want to hear brass instruments well-played and sounding at their most thrilling, you want to hear them in church. When I say in church, I mean in a big stone building where there's lots of resonance. And the same goes for other wind instruments as well. The organ is particularly vulnerable to acoustic because of the unique characteristic of its sound production. Once you depress the key, the sound goes on until you release the key — unlike any other musical instrument. With any other musical instrument, you make the sound, and from that moment on it dies. If you're playing the piano, you strike the string — it's inflected, as we say — it's going to die from that moment on. Same with the harpsichord. A violin note is limited by the length of the bow; an oboe or a flute note is limited by the amount of air in the lungs. There are some limitations on every instrument, but not with the organ, and this is one of the biggest problems that the organist has to face, because it is practically possible to play entirely legato. You can play a piece completely legato all the way through, not lifting your fingers from the keys once. And I'm afraid that there are still organists who will do that. [Both laugh] Of course it's purgatory! It's awful! No music was ever intended to be expressionless and uninflected.

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BD: As an organist, you get to decide on what sounds you will hear and then how you will play each piece. Are you like your own conductor and interpreter?

PH: Yes. The interpretation one has grown into over many years of acquaintanceship with that piece.

BD: Are you still learning the pieces that you learned early on?

PH: Yes, one never actually stops learning it. This is one reason why I do a little teaching at

Cambridge University in England, because students have that marvelous habit of asking a very simple question, "Why do you do it like this?" This is a vital question for any performer to be asked constantly, because otherwise you can get into a real rut and play the same piece in the same way, which you don't really care for, particularly when you're tired. I have an interpretation, an interpretive overview of the type of music that I'm playing. But I think I could say with fair accuracy that I have never, ever played a piece of music — particularly by Bach — the same twice.

BD: And yet some of your interpretations have been committed to disc, where they are exact duplicates every time the record is played.

PH: Well, yes. It's interesting you should say that, because a lot of people have said — and this has come out in criticism in many different countries — that when you listen to my records of Bach, you hear it the first time and you have some reaction. Putting it simply, you either are attracted by it or not attracted by it, but if you go to it the second time, you will hear different things in it, and you will go on hearing different things in it. This, for me, is the only excuse for making records — not just me making records, but anybody making records! There is an opportunity here for the discerning listener to explore the music and to learn it, to learn what is possible there; for example, the articulation of an inside part in a fugue, a perfectly ordinary, straightforward, four-part fugue. The first time, you hear it as a whole. Then the third or fourth time, you are conscious of the fact that the tenor part seems to stick out; at one point you are rather more conscious of the tenor than you are of the other three parts. If you listen carefully, you can see the reason why is because I'm treating that particular line in a much more legato manner than the others. Indeed, I may be shortening a touch on the others in order that that line may be projected better. So there are all of these little things, and the discerning listener can therefore have quite a lot of fun listening a second time, a third time, a twentieth time, a thirtieth time. And that, as I say, is the only excuse for any of us to make records.

BD: Is there any chance that with the editing process on the record you make a perfect product, and you then cannot compete with it when you play that same piece live at a concert?

PH: That perfect, yes, of course. And therein lies a little problem, because I don't think I've ever heard a performance of any sort without a mistake in it somewhere, whether it's a symphony orchestra or a solo instrument. When I say a mistake, it may not necessarily be a slipped note — although it often is — but it could be holding a particular phrase a little longer than the musician intended, and it sort of sticks out a mile when he does this. Perhaps his concentration lapsed, and so on and so forth. So there are all these things, but that is the joy of live performance because you are, as it were, sitting on the edge of your seat, and you hope the audience will do the same thing. If the player doesn't metaphorically sit on the edge of his seat while he's playing, you can't expect the audience to. So if the player is just delivering the notes, then the audience will [laughs] sort of lean back and just say, "Oh, so what?" There won't be any effect.

BD: Are there not times when you are doing your very best to deliver the greatest possible performance, and the audience still does kind of lean back?

PH: Ah, well, yes, but then, you see, you're into the field of audience participation.

BD: Do you feel that a recital is a participatory sport?

PH: Oh yes, very much so. In a lecture when he was accepting a prize in the early fifties, Benjamin Britten proposed the idea that there was a Holy Triangle of music. The three parts of the triangle were the composer, the performer and the listener, and each of these was an essential element in the process of music making. So the music is conceived by the composer, it is interpreted, performed and projected by the player, but then it is received by the listener. And the "success" is not just a matter of the performance or of the composer; it is also a matter of how it is received by the listener. So the listener who is well-acquainted with the music of Bach will have a higher perception of the detail, of the emotional content of that piece, than will the person who has spent all his or her life listening to Brahms, shall we say.

BD: Is the music not received at all by the performer who is sending it?

PH: Yes, of course it is. The whole idea is this sort of triangle, but you are right, of course. People often ask me about the recording process. The audience is so important to me because I always have to feel that I am playing out to somebody listening. What happens when I'm recording is that I play to my producer. He is representative, as it were, of the critically appreciative audience. Only he is much more knowledgeable than most of the audience would be, and he does what most audiences do not — that is come back and say, "I think you could do that a bit better!" [Both laugh]

BD: Your records are going to be played in studios and homes of people who have studied Bach intimately and know every single note and inflection, and also by people who go to a record bin and say, "Well, let's try this and see what it is."

PH: That's right, that's right. There's room for all; there's room for both.

BD: Can you take that into account on the record?

PH: Oh yes, I think so. It depends on the music; some is more outward-going. There is music which is easy on the ear, as we know, and there is music which requires a much more developed and educated approach from the listener. Some of Bach's music is really easy on the ear, like the famous *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, for example, which everybody knows.

BD: Is it easy on the ear, or just familiar to audiences?

PH: That's a good question! It's certainly familiar; that's unquestionable. I think that toccata is easy on the ear. It's challenging on the ear. It's something which gets people sitting up and taking notice. In fact, it was the only time in my life — when playing an encore — that I have ever received a most tremendous applause from playing only three notes! I did that at the Sydney Opera House a few years back, and I've known nothing like it! I had to stop and start again because I just did that da-da-dum, and the whole place erupted in a great sort of applause.

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BD: We've kind of danced around this a little bit, so let me ask a great big philosophical question — what's the purpose of music?

PH: Well, it's certainly a food. Whether the question was being asked of a person who liked jazz or the latest pop hit of the moment in whatever style, or whether it was classical music, a good answer, a quick answer would be a counter question, which would be: how would you imagine a world without any musical notes in it? You would find, I think, that even the most casual listener to a mindless background of any sort of popular music would say that there would be something missing from life without music. You can't avoid it, really. You just go outdoors and there are sounds going up and down all around us. In nature, for example, there are birds; even people talking and inflections and so on. It's all music. It's a very simple question. It's so simple that I have to think about it again! I think it is two things. I think it is first, to feed the soul. That's a complex way of saying that it is an essential part of life's experience. Without it, we would be far less happy and content in our lives than we are. So in that sense, it is a food. In the second sense, it is an entertainment, a refreshment. It is something that is not necessary, but when we have it, we feel that we are better for the experience, that we have more strength to do our job.

BD: Then where is the balance between the essential and the unnecessary; or, as I usually ask it, between the art and entertainment?

PH: I think the balance comes in the type of music that you play, whether it is easy on the ear or whether it requires a more dissecting type of approach or a more questioning approach on the part

of the listener. In the art, I think the listener and the player are involved at a much deeper level in the complexities of the music making process. They're much more interested in the working-out of a particular piece of music in a formal sense, than the casual listener. In that sense, you begin to look at the art, at the food, as it were, the essential nub of the art form. The entertainment side of it is that the performer projects and the listener listens to the most superficial aspects of that piece of music, i.e., the tunes. You would just enjoy the tune and find yourself going away whistling it, humming it at various odd times for the rest of the day, and so on. That's the superficial aspect. As far as the performer is concerned, I can try to address both types of person: the person who is able to accept only the superficial level, and the person who is more educated. I do this by playing music which I know can have an immediate attraction. But then I also apply to that music all sorts of subtleties of interpretation. The word "apply" is wrong. I don't mean to say that it's stuck on. When I'm interpreting that piece, I am involved in a whole series of articulations, of technical phrasings, all of which may be appreciated by the person who has a higher level of critical appreciation than the casual listener. That person will go away having really felt that they've had a meal of music, that they've been fed and they probably want to hear more.

BD: What advice do you have for younger organists coming along?

PH: To use their ears. It's quite amazing how not just organists, but so many young people who are interested in music as a career, seem to think that it is a matter of doing.

BD: Mechanics?

PH: Well, certainly that. Making their fingers work faster, making them work in a certain way, making them more prompt in reacting to the commands of the brain. This is all technical training and certainly they have to do that. But it is all to no avail, whatever technical training they put themselves through, if they cannot hear what they are doing with the ears of the listener. When you are making music, it's probably a very good idea to remember that you're always making it for somebody else. This is some advice which was given to me by my piano teacher when I was about seven. She was a very wise lady and it stuck with me. She would say, "Just imagine, dear, that somebody's sitting on the other side of the room." And I'd say, "But there's not!" She would reply, "No, but just imagine that there is somebody sitting on the other side. Tell you what — I will go and sit on the other side of the room and I want you to play to me." I would start playing and she'd say, "I can't hear that." So I'd play it a bit louder and she'd say, "No, no, no, no, I don't mean louder. I just want you to try to persuade me that you like this music, and you want me to like it, too." This was all at the age of seven and eight. What she was actually talking about was projection. This is quite remarkable because I don't think there are very many teachers of young kids who do that sort of thing. So I was very lucky. The principle is of vital importance, particularly for an organist because when you're sitting at the console, arguably you are sitting in the worst possible place to hear the instrument. You are usually tucked away at the bottom of the organ, so the sound goes out above your head. You're usually in a

large room. The organ cannot be heard as an entity unless you are at least twenty feet away from it, and preferably fifty or maybe even a hundred.

BD: Is that where you place the microphones when you're recording — twenty feet away?

PH: It varies according to the room and according to the size of the organ.

BD: But you're not suggesting that someone sit twenty feet away from the speakers?

PH: Oh, no, no, no, no. I was suggesting that they've got to sit in a place where they can get the optimum effect from the instrument. That's the best advice you can give, because every different auditorium and every instrument is different and has different problems. You just have to decide for yourself where the best place is to sit. The worst place is somewhere where you cannot see the instrument, because the sound from any instrument needs to go as directly as possible to the listener. Now this is terribly, terribly important! In the middle of the nineteenth century, organs in England were moved from the west end of churches up to the chancel and put into a chapel. The choirs followed them and went up there in front of the altar at the time of what's called the Oxford Movement. This was a really disastrous time for the organ because it put the instrument sideways to the listener, and all the sound would come out of the organ and meander its way around masonry and eventually find the listener. By the time that had happened, the listener didn't hear any projection at all. There was no possibility of hearing the consonant of the pipe, or various inflections or articulations of the fingers.

BD: Do you find yourself registering and playing differently if the organ is sideways in a church which, as you say, is all masonry, or a concert hall which is designed purely for sound?

PH: Yes. Oh, yes! You can make much smaller articulative movements in a concert hall.

BD: Be more subtle?

PH: Yes, much more subtle. I've played a lot in concert halls recently. Just a couple of months ago I was playing one of the opening concerts in the new Hong Kong concert hall, where there's a very large mechanical-action organ, and also in Taipei, where there's an instrument that's very similar to the new one in Holy Name Cathedral here, a Dutch organ by Flentrop. In both those instances you can be amazingly subtle, and produce subtlety of line, which in a church of any size would get lost. So, there is an attraction to the concert hall in that respect.
However, there is another side to it, which is that a wind instrument, as I said earlier, works best when it's in an ambience mainly provided by masonry, stone. A concert hall is usually built of wood, and it has a very precisely calculated acoustic, which is unlikely to exceed two seconds, for example. Whereas in a church you will probably find a resonance, with a bit of luck, going to three, four, or even more seconds. You don't get that same resonance in a concert hall that you would get in a church. So the perfect world is very difficult to find! But I think any performer on any instrument will say the same thing about any concert hall, really. I think you'll find that most performers, given the choice of playing in the concert hall

or playing in a lovely, resonant church, would probably say, "I'll have the latter, thank you," because it's so rewarding to hear the warmth of the sound which is created by stone.

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BD: Is playing the organ fun?

PH: Yes! Making music's fun. The moment making music ceases to be fun, give it up! That does happen, you know. People do stop having fun with it, and this does happen with professionals, sometimes — quite a lot, in my experience.

BD: Do you schedule enough time in your own life for vacations to get away from it?

PH: I'm doing it more and more now. You find it is necessary at some stage in your life. Since I stopped being a full-time church musician in 1978, I have worked extremely hard and constantly in concert work and a great deal of recording. Now I find I don't want to do so much work. I want to go for holiday to places where I have played in the past, perhaps, but without the feeling that I've got to pull myself together and give a concert. I'm very fortunate, I suppose, in being able to pick and choose rather more where I go, and to be more selective in how much time I give to playing. This is necessary as a form of self-defense, but it also means, I hope, that the music is better when I make it. Certainly when I listen to records that I made ten or fifteen years ago, I think to myself, "Gosh, that's fast!" I would never play something quite so fast as that nowadays. And yet sometimes, when I'm in a concert hall, for example, I'll find myself doing exactly that and playing that same piece very rapidly; perhaps in a different style, but still with the same sort of tempo. So one changes as one gets older.

BD: You don't want to ask that the records be re-mastered at slightly slower speed — without a drop in pitch? [Both laugh] They can do that now, you know!

PH: Can they?

BD: Yes.

PH: You see, tempo actually has a lot to do with articulation; tempo and articulation and acoustic — that's another form of triangle, thinking of Britten's triangle that I was talking about earlier. The amount of articulation that you can use when you are playing eighteenth century music, for example — although Cesar Franck as well — is limited by the acoustic of the building. So if you're playing in a large acoustic, say four seconds echo, or something like that, or if it's a swimmy acoustic, as we call it in the trade, with lots of counter-echoes going on...

BD: Where it gets muddy?

PH: ...it makes life very difficult, yes, where it gets muddy. And that's absolute hell for the engineers when you're recording. Although the method of articulation will be the same in a piece, the degree of articulation will change according to the acoustic of the building. If you

don't modify your touch according to the acoustic you're playing in, then you will find that if you're playing in a dry acoustic like a concert hall, you are going to over-articulate. It'll sound very dry without an obligato. And if you are in a large building like a church, the music will all sound very muddy, and all running together in this sort of over-legato sort of way. So you have to judge the degree of articulation very much according the acoustic that you're in.

BD: Do you have any advice for someone who wants to compose music for organ, either solo or concerto?

PH: Yes. Use as few notes as possible. That is my one line of advice! [Both laugh] People, young people particularly, when they start to think of writing for the organ — and I wish more would, because there are very few who have written good music for the organ in the last twenty years — the first thing is to try to make music with as few notes and as little sound, as possible. In other words, to use the organ as a musical instrument, and not as a noise machine. Because so many of them use the instrument's highly obvious characteristics of being able to make big noises, they will have massive chords with lots too many notes — far more notes than they need to create a particular harmonic effect. And that, of course, is sloppy writing, sloppy composing, and the total effect is numbing to the audience. I won't learn such music. I'm very fussy as to what modern music I do. I'm not a great player of modern music, anyway. There are other people who play modern music much better than I do, although I do have the people that I like playing and whom I think need a push in the right direction — Hindemith, for example. He is a very underrated composer, certainly as far as the organ is concerned. And indeed, Hindemith would be a composer that I would direct a young composer to. His three organ works were first performed here in America. So Hindemith is, I think, a prime example of a modern composer who understands the organ, and who uses as few notes as possible on the instrument. And where he uses more notes, it is for a specific reason, for a specific harmonic effect. But basically, ninety percent of his music is counterpoint; and it's beautiful, absolutely beautiful! The second thing that I would tell a composer is that when he is writing for the organ, he should imagine that he's writing for voices, so that he's writing in different lines. He should forget the fact that chords exist. He should regard counterpoint as king, and just seek out the best musical lines that he can. The best training that a young organist can have, really, is to be at one and the same time an organist and a choirmaster, and to learn how to get his singers to project in the same way that he has to learn how to project his organ music with his own fingers. Also, if you think of singers, whether you're a composer or a player, you are going to think of breathing. People tend not to think of the organ in terms of breathing.

BD: Because of the constant air pressure, you don't have to breathe in.

PH: That's right, but on the other hand, if you hear any sound going on and on and on and on, what is the first thing that you find yourself wanting to do after about two minutes of this? You want to break that sound and have a breath. There is a clever technical device which is used by woodwind players called circular breathing. If the player has a long passage of notes, he will hold a little breath in the cheeks and use that while he breathes in through his nose and takes a good lungful for the next phrase. That way, the line of notes is apparently seamless; it has no breath in it at all, and it just goes on and on and on and on and on! Psychologically this is totally unnatural, and the listener's first reaction will be, "Gosh, isn't that marvelous!" But shortly afterwards, there will be a second, very strong reaction which will be, "God, I wish he'd take a breath!" [Both laugh] And they try to breathe for him.

BD: Exactly!

PH: The organ is exactly the same as this, and this is why you must not play completely legato all the time — because it doesn't breathe! When Stravinsky was asked why he didn't use the organ, he said, "The monster doesn't breathe." As I've said in a book of mine, what he should have said is, "The player doesn't breathe for the instrument. The player doesn't allow the instrument to breathe." But I understand what Stravinsky meant and he's absolutely right! With any wind instrument, we must allow it to breathe. We must give it space, and this means that the composer must allow for space, for breaths. This is why I say a composer could well think in terms of writing for voices when he's writing for an organ. Also the player, when he's playing, should think of voices. He should think of the necessity for breathing and where he would tell his altos or his tenors to take a breath in this particular line. That is partly a matter of interpretation, if it's Bach; it's partly a matter of choice if it's more romantic music.

BD: Is the organ the king of instruments?

PH: Yes, I think it is. It was in the eighteenth century. From its very beginnings until the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was the loudest, largest instrument ever used. Some of these organs must have sounded very large indeed, compared even with a string orchestra, for example, and yet organs in the eighteenth century and earlier were not loud instruments. They were not intense; the sound was not an intense sound. It didn't sort of knock you over backwards. That is a late nineteenth century, twentieth century phenomenon, where you have an organ which really gets quite painful because it's so loud. That is not being king; that's being a dictator. But the organ, when one thinks of it in the sense of the eighteenth century instrument, where we have an instrument which is really clothed in the most marvelous tonal colors, it is a regal instrument. Yes, it is the king of instruments, and that's what we're trying to do nowadays; we're trying to return to that delicacy of sound, so that the player may make music with as much elasticity and as much delicacy as any other instrumentalist would on his own particular instrument, whatever it may be. In other words, we're trying to get the organ back into the mainstream of music; and it is happening. It is a very popular instrument, particularly in places where the organ has no connection with church — for example, in the Far East. Every new concert hall which goes up in the Far East

has a fine, large, new mechanical-action organ. The combination of that plus records and people going to and giving concerts, makes for a critical awareness of the instrument there, and in the parts of the world where similar things are happening, which we in the western countries could well learn from, and I think are beginning to.

BD: Thank you for helping to teach us.

PH: I hope I shall be able to go on doing so for a little while longer.

Peter Hurford

Born: November 22, 1930 - Minehead, Somerset, England

The English organist (and composer), Peter Hurford, studied initially with Harold Darke, the famous and much-respected English organist and composer. He then read both music and law at Jesus College, Cambridge University, graduating with dual degrees. Through study in Paris with the blind French organist André Marchal, Hurford explored the music of the Baroque period, with a particular emphasis on J.S. Bach and the French masters, and he acquired something of his teacher's brilliance as an improviser.

Peter

Hurford's own singular notions of authentic performing style also took form at that time and were soon regularly implemented before the public once

he had received an appointment as music master (organist and choirmaster) at St. Albans Abbey in 1958. There, he experimented, rebuilt the organ to comply with his convictions, and soon began to attract the attention of other English organists unsatisfied with the traditional and often heavy-handed Baroque style customarily heard in English churches. He conceived the idea of an organ competition in 1963, partly to celebrate the new Harrison & Harrison organ designed by Ralph Downes and himself. This venture was successful mainly because of the young Hurford's rapidly growing stature in Britain and overseas as a result of his refreshing notions of authentic performing style. There, organists and organ scholars were able to gather to hear and discuss performances and share scholarly findings regarding performance style, registration, repertory, and audience building. This has grown into the St Albans International Organ Festival, a world-renowned festival of organ music with competitions whose past winners include many of the great names in modern organ music including Dame Gillian Weir, David Sanger, Thomas Trotter and Kevin Bowyer. Many a competitor counted himself fortunate to have received an autographed copy of Hurford's recordings of Bach's complete organ works.

Peter Hurford has enjoyed an enviable reputation for both his organ playing and his musical scholarship. The latter has produced not only revised ideas about performance of early music, but also different notions about the construction of the instruments upon which such music ought to be played. His extensive recordings for the Decca/London label have passed into the realm of the legendary and his live performances have attracted positive reviews, as well as stimulating numerous discussions regarding performance practice and the art of organ building. He is best known for his interpretations of Bach. His expertise is not limited to Bach, however - he is expanded to François Couperin on one side and the Romantic period on the other. His playing show excellence in attention to stylistic detail. His playing

style is noted for clean articulation, and a sense of proper tempi. His often-brisk tempi and variety of registration decidedly changed organ performance.

After decades at St. Albans, Peter Hurford resigned to fulfil the demand for solo performances. By that time, his recordings had made his name a familiar one even to those who had not heard him in live performance. In addition to his concert appearances, Hurford began to devote time to teaching and made himself a welcome visiting scholar in numerous venues, especially in England and the USA. After having worked out his ideas during several decades of lecturing and performance, he assembled them in written form in his book *Making Music on the Organ*, published in 1988 (Oxford University Press). The simple, direct title conceals a wealth of carefully considered issues and effective solutions to them.

Peter Hurford also achieved some renown as a composer of organ works and choral pieces. Mostly dating from his St. Albans years, some of them are flowingly lyrical while others are joyously animated. All reflect Hurford's skill and inclinations as an improviser.

Peter Hurford's largest recording project was putting on disc the complete organ works of J.S. Bach, a project that began in the 1970's and lasted 12 years. The full set is still available along side a smaller, two-disc set of highlights. Another double-disc set of organ masses by F. Couperin is also a seminal issue. He has also made recordings of the Romantic literature for organ.

This interview was recorded in Chicago on March 18, 1990. Portions were used (along with recordings) on WNIB later that year, also in 1995 and 2000. The transcription was made and posted on this website in 2009.

Award-winning broadcaster Bruce Duffie was with **WNIB, Classical 97** in Chicago from 1975 until its final moment as a classical station in February of 2001. His interviews have also appeared in various magazines and journals since 1980, and he now continues his broadcast series on **WNUR-FM**, as well as on **Contemporary Classical Internet Radio**.

You are invited to visit his website for more information about his work, including selected transcripts of other interviews, plus a full list of his guests. He would also like to call your attention to the photos and information about his grandfather, who was a pioneer in the automotive field more than a century ago. You may also send him E-Mail with comments, questions and suggestions.