

*This interview was realized in July 2013 and was planned to be published as “meslanges” in Daniel Roth’s biography.*

***Pierre-François Dub-Attenti (PF): Dear Ken, I know you commission compositions. Could you tell us why you do this?***

Kenneth Starr (KS): I commission compositions for my use and for the joy it gives me to share new music. I am director of music (organist & choir director) of Saint-Patrick Church, Boston, so I commission music for use there and I commission music for special occasion. I commissioned Nancy Plummer Faxon (*Sonata for Organ*) for my first concert at Notre-Dame de Paris in June 1977, then Jack Ossewaarde (Voluntary on “Credo”) and Gerre Hancock (Fantasy on “Lauda Sion”) for a concert of American music I played in the Cathedral of Lausanne, Switzerland, in September 1979. There are many other occasions with commissioned music.

I also commission compositions for an emotional reason. The Grand Orgue Cavaille-Coll of Saint-Ouen in Rouen is the organ I love most of all and above all others. For me, that organ is the most beautiful in the world. In 1979, I asked André Fleury, a very great gentleman, to compose in whatever format he chose a new composition to be dedicated “au grand orgue Cavaille-Coll de Saint-Ouen à Rouen” - notice the dedication is to the organ and its builder. This composition entitled *Prélude, Cantilene et Final* was first performed by the composer himself on that majestic organ 25 September 1983.

***PF: You are one of the most Francophile American organists I know, did you ask other French composers to compose?***

KS: The name Aristide Cavaille-Coll explains everything I do with French composers/organists. On three occasions I commissioned Eugene Reuchsel (1900-1988), who was a friend of Vierne, de Saint-Martin, Widor, Dupré and Bonnet. He composed *Evocation de Louis Vierne aux Grandes Orgues de Notre-Dame de Paris* (1978), *Deux Pièces de Concert en hommage à la mémoire d'Aristide Cavaille-Coll* (1983), later enlarged and included in a volume titled *Six Pièces de Concert* and *La Vie du Christ : Evocations d'après l'Evangile de Saint-Luc* (1986).

***PF: And, as for your commissions to Mr. Roth?***

KS: Many years ago, I bought a vinyl recording of Daniel Roth improvising at Sacré-Coeur and heard the *Cortège sur l'introit Cogitationes de la messe du Sacré-Coeur*: I immediately thought that was exactly the music I was seeking for Christmas Midnight Mass at Saint-Patrick Church. So, I wrote to Mr. Roth in 1986 and asked him if he would accept a commission to compose for Midnight Mass. In 1988, I received the *Prélude*; in 1989, the *Communion* and in 1990, the *Postlude* of what is now *Pour la Nuit de Noël*. Alphonse Leduc publishes this so it is available to every organist.

1999 was the centenary of the death of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. So again, to honor that great man and his genius, I commissioned Daniel Roth in 1995. Mr. Roth totally understands the sonorities of Saint-Sulpice and, even more important, he is extremely respectful and absolutely protective of that wonderful organ. Mr. Roth composed *Livre d'orgue pour le*

*Magnificat* as a homage to the organbuilder. Each of the 10 pieces uses a sonority typical of Cavaille-Coll so all the registration possibilities are there.

Returning for a second time to the idea of commissioning new music dedicated to a Cavaille-Coll organ, I turned a third time to Mr. Roth in 2002. This time, I asked him to honor the grand orgue and the orgue de chœur of Saint-Sulpice. Mr. Roth is composing a new piece for the two organs to be dedicated to the two Cavaillé-Coll organs of Saint-Sulpice.

***PF: Could you please tell us how far do you “manage” the composers, do they send you any drafts? Do you let them completely free?***

KS: I write to a composer with an idea or a specific purpose/occasion and invite him/her to accept a commission. After accepting, the composer is totally free - I do not intrude, interfere or badger. A good composer needs no annoyance from me. I wait for the completed manuscript.

***PF: Is it easy to play this new French music on American organs? How do you adapt the registrations?***

KS: Each organ has (or should have) its own personality. I use whatever resources are available. I use my ears and change the suggestions in the manuscript to what is possible. Always use your ears. Seek good taste and use your ears. When in doubt: use your ears!

***PF: You seem to love Cavaillé-Coll’s organs in particular...***

KS: The great Aristide created sonorities that can touch the soul. My respect for him is beyond immense, so I turn to composers who understand what Cavaillé-Coll created and are willing to compose new compositions that honor this organbuilder. I am perhaps a dinosaur from a wrong century. I hear new organs built today that are NOT beautiful. Some are harsh. Some are cold. Some are outright ugly. Cavaille-Coll, from the smallest to the largest, always built beautiful organs, and his craftsmanship is always the very best. Thank You, Aristide!

I do have in my head a few more ideas for future commissions and I hope to make them a reality... when I can offer a generous payment!

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