A Conversation with Christopher Houlihan

Joyce Johnson Robinson

Christopher Houlihan may very well be the youngest organist ever interviewed by THE DIAPASON. A Connecticut native, Houlihan—sometimes known as "Houli"—made his debut album at 19 (a recording of the Vierne Second Symphony, made before he went to France in his junior year; see the review by David Wagner in THE DIAPASON, January 2009, pp. 19–20). His second recording (*Joys, Mournings, and Battles*, Towerhill Recordings) was recently released—a significant achievement for any artist, but all the more amazing given his youth. Houlihan, who placed first in the High School Division of the Albert Schweitzer Organ Competition (see David Spicer, "Albert Schweitzer Organ Competition 2003," THE DIAPASON, November 2003, p. 17), is a graduate of Trinity College, where he studied with John Rose; during his senior year he made his orchestral debut with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, performing Barber's *Toccata Festiva*. Rose had insisted that Houlihan pursue some study with a different teacher, so during his junior year Houlihan studied with Jean-Baptiste Robin at the conservatory in Versailles, where he earned the French equivalent of an artist's diploma. He also served as assistant musician at the American Cathedral in Paris, under Edward Tipton, working as choral accompanist and directing two children's choirs. One Sunday when Tipton was away and Houlihan was to serve as both organist and choir director, the cathedral received a few hours' advance notice that the President and First Lady of the United States, Mr. and Mrs. George W. Bush, would attend.

Houlihan's first teacher, John Rose, described meeting the youngster prior to playing a recital—the young man and other family members came an hour early to get a bird's-eye-view seat, in order to see the console and player up close. This initial meeting led to lessons with Rose at Trinity College, and subsequently to Houlihan's matriculating there. Rose notes that one of Houlihan's qualities is the ability to generate excitement about the organ and its music, to be able to communicate the music and his passion for it to an audience, and credits some of this to Houlihan's technical mastery of rhythm and accent in way that makes the music "electrifying." Rose feels that Houlihan's "thirst for knowledge and learning" lead him to be "well informed about various performance practices," yet realizing "the importance of bringing his own ideas and a fresh outlook to his interpretations. He also understands (and enjoys) the need to adapt his ideas uniquely, as needed, from one organ to the next."

Christopher Houlihan's fans are of all ages and include an 85-year-old retired math teacher at Trinity, along with students at the college; they have formed a group known as the "Houli Fans," and this has expanded into marketing: t-shirts, caps, and mugs are available. Most of these students had never experienced an organ recital before supporting their friend. When he performed with the symphony during his senior year, they chartered buses to take throngs of students to the orchestra hall, where they rained down loud cheers from the balcony. Christopher Houlihan currently studies with Paul Jacobs at the Juilliard School, and is represented by Phillip Truckenbrod Concert Artists (www.concertartists.com). Houlihan can be found on Facebook and YouTube, and his website is <www.christopherhoulihan.com>.

Joyce Robinson: Do you come from a musical family?

Christopher Houlihan: My family isn't musical, but my parents have always been incredibly supportive of my passion. I think my mother signed me up for piano lessons just so I would have something to do after school. At the beginning I liked it, I thought it was all right, but I kept practicing and eventually joined a church choir in my hometown of Somers, Connecticut when I was about 8, and discovered the organ. The organ in the church was an electronic organ, and the organist there always had the tremolos on, but she showed me everything she knew and encouraged me to explore. She let me practice on the instrument. I was immediately excited by it and drawn into it, and I started reading as much as I could about the organ and tried to talk to other organists, but at the same time, I had no idea how to take organ lessons. It was obvious you could take piano lessons or lessons on any other instrument, but the organ was kind of a mystery to both my parents and me. My mother loves telling the story of walking into my bedroom and seeing me at my digital keyboard, moving my feet around. She discovered I had put rows of masking tape on her hardwood floor, in the outline of the pedalboard, so that I could learn how to play the pedals. She was a bit horrified that I had put tape all over her floor, but at the same time, she thought it was pretty clever.

Then, in 1999, my mother read in the newspaper that there was an organ concert going on in Springfield, Massachusetts. We'd never been to an organ concert before, never really heard any classical organ music, but we went, and I got hooked. I still have the program from that recital, and, looking back on it, I can't imagine having had a better introduction to concert organ music: I heard Franck's *Pièce Héroïque* and Vierne's Third Symphony for the first time that day. After the concert, we spoke with the organist, and I said, "I want to take organ lessons, what do I do?" And the man said, "Why don't you come down to Hartford and play for me?" This was John Rose. We went to Trinity, and I played for him; I was twelve years old, and he took me on as a student. From there, it just took off—I kept studying

John Rose gives Christopher Houlihan his first organ lesson

with him throughout high school, and when it came time to look at colleges, Trinity turned out to be a very good fit for me. John never pushed for me to go to Trinity; he would have been supportive of any decision I made, but for a lot of reasons I chose Trinity, and I'm really glad I did.

JR: Is that where your interest in Vierne came from? John Rose is well known for his work on Vierne, and your first recording was mostly Vierne.

CH: Yes, it was. John has been a wonderful mentor, and he's never forced any particular style of playing on me, and I've studied all sorts of repertoire with him. But I do suppose I've had more exposure to Vierne than many other people, certainly because of his love of Vierne. I remember working on the "Berceuse" from the *24 Pieces in Free Style*; that was probably my first Vierne piece.

JR: How old were you then?

CH: I'm not sure! I was in middle school, probably 13. Then when I got to Trinity, he said "You should really learn the Vierne Second Symphony, I think it would be a good piece for you." And I learned it, and I absolutely loved it. Vierne is very chromatic, it's very different from most Widor . . . Some people say things like, "You should never play a complete French symphony, it's too long, it's trash, audiences don't like it," but I find it incredibly gratifying as a performer and as a listener to hear a complete symphony. You rarely go to an orchestral concert and hear the Finale from a Beethoven symphony—you hear the whole work. I think a Vierne symphony works much better as a complete piece . . . the individual movements speak much more profoundly when you hear them in the context of the whole symphony.

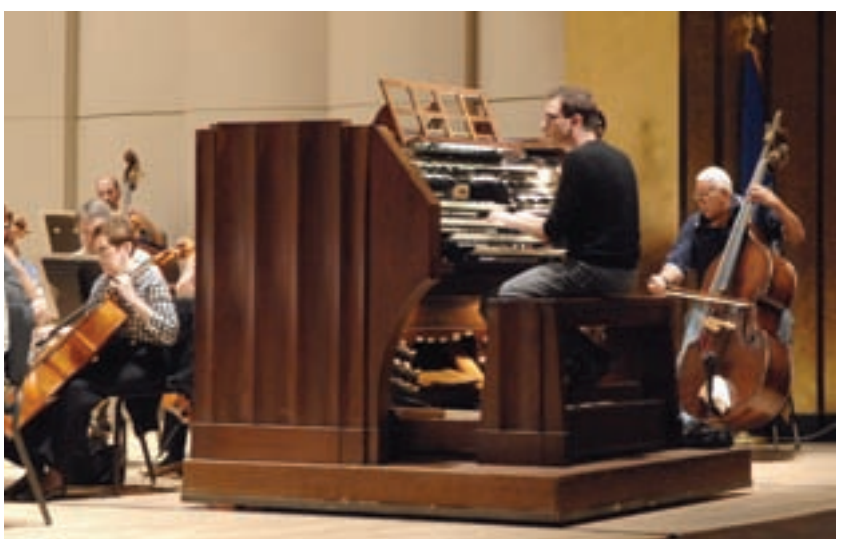
JR: You must have worked on quite a bit of French repertoire with John Rose before you went to France.

CH: I did.

JR: And when you got to France, did you find the approach to French music to be different?

CH: That's a complicated question to answer, but yes, the approach was very different. I went to France because I had a strong affinity for French romantic music, but I also wanted to learn more about French classical music, as well as study modern French music. Certainly one of the most beneficial aspects of studying organ music in France is hearing and playing on French organs. But having grown up on American organs, playing primarily in drier American acoustics, and approaching music from an American perspective in general, I really had to learn a new style of playing, one that was more effective for those instruments and rooms. My teacher, Jean-Baptiste Robin, often talked to me about "taste," which is, of course, completely subjective, but I became more aware of the fact that taste is also cultural, and people from two different backgrounds (musical and otherwise) will have very different opinions about what they consider to be "in good or bad taste." For example, sometimes I would phrase something a certain way, or accent something a certain way, and Jean-Baptiste would remark that it sounded "American." Well, I am American, after all!

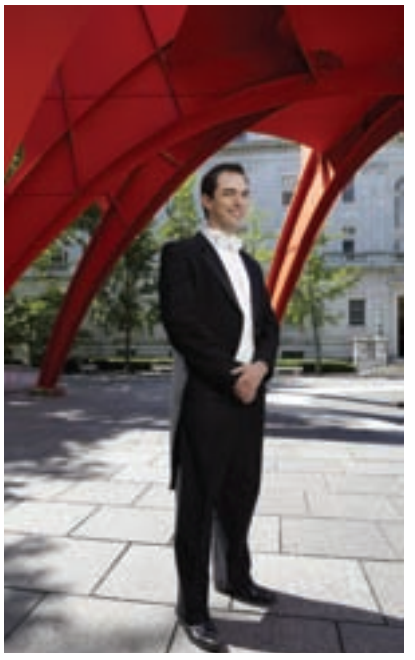
What is true, though, is that French music sounds most "at home" on French organs. One of the most incredible experiences I had was going to Poitiers Cathedral, where Jean-Baptiste Robin is *titulaire*, and hearing the 1791 Clicquot organ there. When I heard French classical music on that instrument I was almost in tears, it was so beautiful. That music came alive and worked in a way I had never heard it before. The same can be said of romantic music, but to a less extreme degree, when hearing it on French romantic organs. But what I've come to believe through those experiences is that what is far more important than choosing the historically correct stops, or playing in a historically correct way, is the type of musical effect that comes across to a



Rehearsing with the Hartford Symphony

Christopher Houlihan with violinist Joshua Bell

Arriving for a recital at the church of Saint-Eusèbe, Auxerre, France



In the shade of a modern artwork

listener. If hearing Widor played at St. Sulpice brings you to your knees, then that music should have the same effect wherever you're playing it, and, typically, in my opinion, to get that kind of effect on American organs, you have to play the music in a very different way than you might in France.

JR: So are you saying that one must register more with one's ears than just looking at labels on the knobs?

CH: Yes, absolutely. And at the same time, you don't have to travel all the way to France to register that way. I think you have to go with your gut—you have to look for what's the most musical solution when you're registering anything. It's not what the book says is the correct registration, but what has an effect—what makes the music come alive.

JR: Was there any particular aspect of registration that you had to make adjustments for when you returned to the U.S.?

CH: There are all sorts of things one can do. One basic idea that is important to know about is the upward voicing that a lot of the French organs have, where things really sing in the treble in a way they don't on most of our organs. There's not an easy solution to this, but it's something to keep in mind and listen for. The other thing is that our Swell boxes are, generally, much more expressive even on smaller organs, and you can use them in a different way for the kinds of musical effects that naturally occur without moving the box on a French organ. The reason Franck used the Hautbois with his 8′ foundations was to make the Swell more expressive . . . if the oboe isn't needed, I leave it off. Many American organs have the only chorus reeds in the Swell, and they might be quite loud; therefore, you don't always have to play with the full Swell on where Vierne or Widor says "full Swell." If you've only got a full Swell and one more reed on the Great, you don't get a crescendo effect; you go from loud to louder. You've got to allow more liberty for these things, because in the end you're being truer to the composer's intentions . . .

JR: Tell us a little more about your time in France. Life in Europe is usually different than it is here, so what was it like for you—your schedule, your study, your practicing? Did you spend time learning the language?

CH: I was there through the Trinity College Paris program. They have about 20 to 30 students there each semester, and through that program I took French language classes, a class on French culture, a course on art history and architecture—they offer all sorts of courses, ranging from history of the European Union, to independent studies on anything you want to learn about. I did part of my coursework through them, and Trinity gave me credit for my organ lessons at the conservatory in Versailles, and my private harmony lessons with Jean-Baptiste.

I was also lucky enough to have an incredible job at the American Cathedral in Paris, working with Ned Tipton. I was the assistant musician, which meant that I accompanied the choir on Sunday mornings, and I directed two children's choirs—the children's group, and a teenager group—and along with all this I had an apartment in the cathedral tower, which was really incredible! You could climb to the top of the tower, and you had one of the most spectacular views of Paris. You could see all of the major monuments, really stunning. The cathedral is on the Avenue Georges V, which is right off the Champs Elysees . . . the whole experience was very surreal and I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity. And the people at the cathedral are so wonderful. There are a lot of Americans, of course, and people from England, from Australia, and French people too!

JR: During your time in France, you performed for George and Laura Bush at the American Cathedral in Paris. Can you recall that day?

CH: I'll certainly never forget it. It actually began on a Saturday afternoon when I got a knock at the door of my apartment. Now, my apartment was 83 steps up a cement spiral staircase, so I didn't get very many knocks on the door . . . I was fairly surprised to discover the dean of the cathedral and two French police officers with enormous rifles standing in front of me. They explained who would be coming for a visit the following morning. To complicate things, Ned was away, the adult choir hadn't had a rehearsal the previous Thursday, and we had the children's choir scheduled to sing that morning too. Unfortunately, we had to keep the news completely secret for security reasons, so I couldn't let the choirs know what would be happening. Sunday morning was a little hectic . . . security came and set up metal detectors, dogs sniffed through the whole building, and of course, they didn't care that I had a choir to rehearse! We wound up with about 15 minutes to run through the anthems, but we pulled it off pretty well.

JR: What were your studies like with Jean-Baptiste Robin?

CH: Robin was an excellent teacher and I learned a great deal from him. At his recommendation, we spent the year working almost exclusively on French music, and nothing could have made me happier. Each week I would prepare a different piece, by de Grigny, Marchand, Couperin, or one of the other French Baroque composers. We worked a great deal on Franck, of course, on Alain's *Trois Danses*, as well as one of Robin's own pieces, *Trois Éléments d'un Songe*.

JR: What made you choose Juilliard for graduate study? For that matter, why even bother with graduate study, because you had already made a recording, you were signed to professional management before you even got a bachelor's degree, if my calculations were correct?

CH: True. I chose Juilliard because I really wanted to work with Paul Jacobs and I have had a wonderful time studying with him. I've been lucky at this point to have studied both at Trinity and at Juilliard, and have had vastly different experiences at both schools. At Trinity, the focus was on studying music in a broader context—a liberal arts school; I took classes in all sorts of things: science, math, philosophy—it was wonderful, and I made friends with all sorts of people studying all different subjects, and I can't say enough positive things about how that can affect one's perspective on making music. But I really felt I was ready to study music in a much more intense environment, and Juilliard was a great choice for that. I love being in New York City, being at Juilliard, and working with Paul. It's been very rewarding.

JR: Has it been an opportunity to learn a lot of new repertoire, or just refine what you already know?

CH: One of the unique things about the Juilliard program is that we're required to perform a new piece each Thursday morning in our organ studio class, which is open to the public. And that was definitely a big draw to go there, to learn a lot of repertoire. It can sometimes be difficult to learn a piece very deeply when you're going through so much music so quickly, but you can always bring things back to Paul and work on them more, and of course work on them more on your own, which is where the real music happens, spending time getting to know the music very intimately. To touch on the last question again, even though I've been lucky to have these opportunities to record a CD and study in France and work under management, which I'm incredibly grateful for and excited by, I believe one never really stops learning. Juilliard has been a wonderful place for me to grow more as a musician, and I hope to continue to do that for the rest of my life.

JR: You have a website, and a presence on Facebook—do you find that these media help build your audiences?

CH: I'm not sure, but I do think they're incredibly important tools. How

At the American Cathedral in Paris

The well-dressed Houli Fan

With the youngest Houli Fan

Houli Fan headgear

With soprano Christine Brewer, at the American Cathedral in Paris

With John Rose, after a recital at the church of Saint-Eusèbe, Auxerre, France

many people are on Facebook now? I have no idea, but there's no reason not to take advantage of it and to be communicating in the world where most people are interacting today. I don't know if my online presence necessarily helps build my audience, but it certainly doesn't hurt it. It certainly helps attract younger people.

JR: Do you notice that your audience has a younger demographic than that of other organists?

CH: I don't think so, not yet at least, but attracting younger people to classical music is something I feel very strongly about. And one of the greatest things I experienced at Trinity was bringing my friends who weren't musicians to my organ concerts, and getting them excited about it. They responded very positively.

JR: Would that be the Houli Fans?

CH: The Houli Fans grew out of that, from friends of mine who weren't musicians, but who came to my organ concerts and got excited by the music and discovered something far more fantastic than they ever expected to. I would have never guessed some of my college friends would greet me by humming the opening bars of Vierne's Second Symphony—or talk to me about how fascinating a Bach fugue was. Houli Fans has caught on in a very organic way, and audiences everywhere I go are interested to hear more about it.

At Trinity, students came to the concerts and saw that I loved performing, thought the music was exciting, and they responded by getting more people to come! This is such a good sign for organ music, to see people, of any age, who don't know anything about organ music responding to it. I think in a way the organ may stand in a better place now than it ever has, I suppose you could say—it has been so dismissed and ignored for so many years, that now it stands to be rediscovered. We've all been in situations where people ask about being an organist. They really don't know what that is, they don't know what that means, what we actually do. When they hear exciting classical organ music, they're so wowed by it—it's true. I've played recitals this year and people come up to me and say, "This was my first organ concert and it was way better than I ever expected!" I tell them, "Now go tell somebody else. And come back again and bring them!" Once people discover what's going on, they're excited by it. And that's a really good sign.

JR: Do you see any special role for technology such as iPods or YouTube to advance organ music, or are those just tools like a CD would be?

CH: I think what's important is reaching as many people as you possibly can. And people are on Facebook, on YouTube—a lot of people are using these things, and if we ignore them (and I'm not suggesting we necessarily are), you're ignoring a big part of your audience. So I think it can absolutely help. YouTube is a fantastic resource for hearing and seeing performances—it's an incredible archive of music and musicians and organs and all kinds of music, not just organ music, and quite a tool for marketing and advertising. Everything links to something else, and people can see you and discover other organ music and other performances.

JR: Well, back to the Houli Fans. What are they up to these days?

CH: We have shirts and hats and coffee mugs, and people are really responding well to it. Everywhere I've been this year I hear "Oh, I'm going to join the Houli Fans" and "I'm your newest Houli Fan" and things like that. And I find that both musicians and non-musicians want a very fun way to connect with the performer and somehow be involved in the performance. It's fun!

And there's nothing wrong with having a little bit of fun, or with classical music being fun. It's been fun for centuries!

JR: You also have an interest in musical theater. Do you have much time for that any more?

CH: No, not right now, in graduate school, and with a busy performance schedule. But I did a lot of it in high school—I was music director of several shows. That was a lot of fun, and actually a really great learning experience. And I did a lot of it in college, too—music directing, performing on stage, singing, dancing, and all of that. I really enjoy it. At the moment I don't have plans to do it professionally, but it's a small passion of mine. I particularly love the music of Stephen Sondheim, and, coincidentally, I'm going to be inaugurating the organ at the Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts in Fairfield, Iowa.

I think there's a lot that musicians can learn from theater, both from straight drama and musical theater, about how to approach a musical score, similar to the way an actor takes a script and analyzes everything that's going on to create a character, and perform that character night after night. I try to approach music the same way—take the score and truly consider how to create a musical experience—in a way . . . a whole play. Not necessarily a story, but create the kind of experience I'd like to have as a listener. I think there's a lot we can learn from theater and the other arts.

JR: Of what you've worked on so far, is there any particular repertoire you found a difficult nut to crack—you mentioned finding the character and learning how to bring that out; is there any music that's been, say, a little more opaque for you?

CH: One of the most incredible things about the organ literature, and one of the most daunting, is the centuries that it spans. All this repertoire and all these different styles—personally, I think it's impossible to be fluent in and to perform all these styles in a convincing way. Maybe it's possible; I'd like to be wrong. When I'm learning a piece in a different style that I haven't studied before, I try to approach it with respect for the scholarship that's been done on it and its performance practice, but also perform it in a way that feels honest to me, so that I can perform it and convince the audience of the music. I don't think there is much value in performing something just because you think you should—that you should play so-and-so's music. Well, what if you don't like so-and-so's music? A lot of people may like so-and-so's music, and a lot of scholars may say it's important . . . But I don't have to perform everything under the sun.

JR: In one of Gavin Black's regular columns in The Diapason, one of his points was that if you don't really like something, why waste your time learning it? Life's too short—unless you're in a competition and it's required.

CH: At the same time, I've learned some pieces—I'm not sure I can name a specific one—where I'm not sure about it at the beginning, or I think I'm not going to like the piece. But then after I learn it I think, "Wow, now that I've studied it, and learned more about what the composer was trying to do, and found ways to make it come alive for my own performance, it really is a good piece." And sometimes I decide to learn a piece, starting off by thinking it's a great piece, and then after becoming more familiar with it, decide "This isn't right for me." It works both ways.

JR: You've already recorded two CDs—are you preparing any other recordings? What are your other plans for the future?

CH: I hope to be able to keep recording, and I hope to be able to continue performing. I really enjoy traveling and meeting new people, but most importantly, I love performing and bringing music to an audience. I believe it's more like making music with an audience. Sometimes I even tell that to the audience too—I thank them for making music with me, since I can't do it by myself, and since I get so much joy from performing. Eventually, I'd love to be teaching and sharing my love of organ music with others in any way I can. ■

Joyce Johnson Robinson is associate editor of The Diapason.