

A conversation with James Kibbie

Joyce Johnson Robinson

James Kibbie is perhaps best known through his position as professor of organ at the University of Michigan, where he has served on the organ faculty since 1981. Also quite active as a performer and clinician, Kibbie is at present involved in a project to record all of J. S. Bach's organ works, with the recordings to be made available, free of charge, through Internet distribution rather than CDs (see www.blockmrecords.org). A portent of this is Kibbie's own website (www-personal.umich.edu/~jkibbie/), where the professor has presented a yearly "Christmas card" of a downloadable performance, recorded on the Létourneau instrument at his home. We talked with James Kibbie during a visit he made in May 2007 to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois to present a recital and masterclass.

Joyce Robinson: Let's begin by asking how you got "the bug."

James Kibbie: I'm from Iowa! A lot of organists are from Iowa, and the way I got interested in the organ was the way that every single organist does, by hearing it played in church. It is a really valuable thing for churches to allow young musicians access to the organ. That was the case in the congregation where I grew up, and I think that experience is what creates organists.

JR: Did you come from a musical home? Were your parents musicians? Did they encourage your musical studies?

JK: My mother was a pianist, and I begged her to teach me to play. She was a school teacher, and she knew kids pretty well. She was smart enough not to try to force me to practice. Instead, the rule was that either I practiced regularly, or I had to give up completely and never touch the piano. That was enough motivation (sometimes just barely). My father was also a teacher, and he believed fervently that young people should pursue their own dreams and goals, wherever that led them. He always encouraged me, though I think it was a surprise to him to have a musician for a son.

JR: I notice you are wearing a POE shirt!

JK: This is from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a couple of years ago. I am so hot on this idea of pipe organ encounters! They have been enormously successful. I've taught at a number of them with somewhat different formats, and it turns out that any format for the POE works, because if you just bring young people together with the organ, the instrument sells itself.

JR: AGO statistics don't show college enrollments going up. By now POEs should have had an effect, but they don't seem to be increasing enrollment in organ programs.

JK: We're doing well with enrollment at the University of Michigan. Not just in numbers, but in terms of quality—phenomenally gifted students, particularly undergrads. We routinely see now on résumés from students who are applying that they have as high school students attended at least one, many times more than one, POE. We definitely see the results—not just in numbers, but in the level of preparation for students.

JR: That's reassuring. Now where did you get your bachelor's degree?

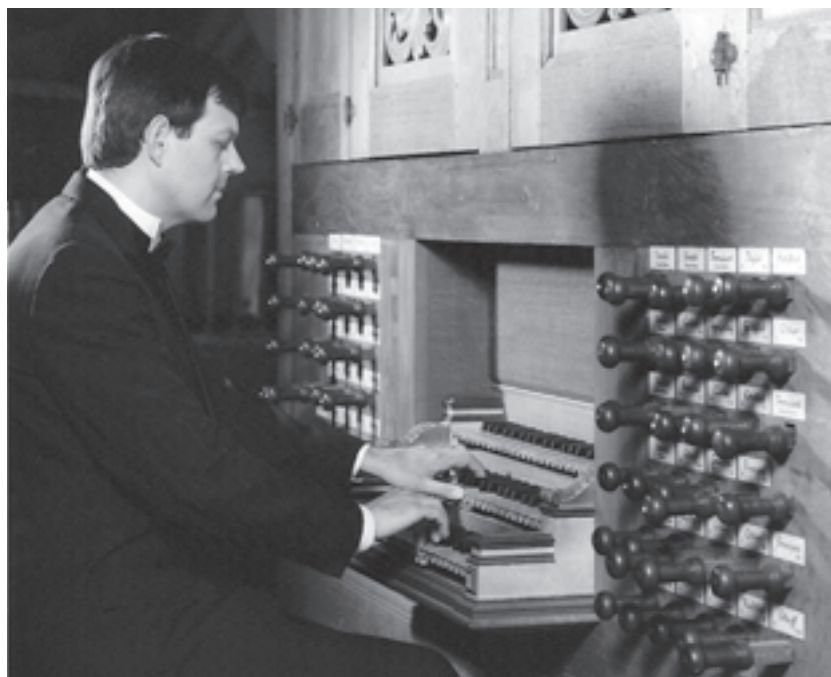
JK: What at that time was called North Texas State University. It's now the University of North Texas. I got bachelor's and master's there, with Donald Willing.

JR: And then you went on to Michigan, and you studied with Marilyn Mason—who's now your colleague?

JK: Yes. I was really lucky—I had those



In Hill Auditorium at the University of Michigan, 1997



In 1987 at the Schnitger in Norden

two master teachers, who are very different as musicians and as people, but they were both so kind to me. And it turned out later that they were both *exactly* the right teacher for me at that particular time in my development.

JR: You went on to win some competitions—the Grand Prix de Chartres and the Prague competition. You had recorded and played music of Czech composers—Ropek, for example—was that an outgrowth of the competition?

JK: This was in 1979, at the height of the Cold War, so it was a very different place than the Czech Republic is now. After the winner's recital at Dvořák Hall in Prague, Jiří Ropek came up and introduced himself and invited me to have dinner with him and his family. He was professor of composition at the Prague Conservatory and also organist at St. James Church, which is a historic church in the Old Town section of Prague. That started a long, warm friendship. In fact, one of the pieces I'm playing tonight is his variations on *Victimae Paschali*—he gave me a copy of the score to those variations at that first dinner, and said that he hoped maybe I would learn them and perform them, and I have performed them many times over the years. He passed away in 2005.

During the first years that I knew him, we corresponded—though not too often, because he said if he received too many letters from the West, it was a red flag

to the Communist authorities, and he got in trouble, because he was a known opponent of the Communist regime, so it was certainly easier for him after the fall of Communism. He had earned a doctorate at the Carolinian University in Prague, but the Communist government had prevented it being awarded. Finally, in 1990, when Communism ended, the university could officially award him the doctorate that he earned over 40 years earlier. It's remarkable!

JR: You've been at the University of Michigan now for over a quarter of a century!

JK: That's right, 26 years. I love it! I get up most mornings looking forward to most of the things I'm going to do that day. I realize that's a gift that not everyone has.

JR: Over the course of over a quarter of a century you must have noticed some changes, both in the program and in the students.

JK: There have been big changes in the field of church music, and all of us are either working as church musicians, or teaching students who will work as church musicians, so it's central to everything that we do. I don't think anyone of us could have foreseen all of the ways that church music has changed over the past 25 years. That means we can't foresee how it's going to change in the next 25 years.

I've been thinking about this—how do



James Kibbie ca. 1960



At Holy Family Church, Fort Worth, 1976



At 1980 Chartres competition

I prepare my students when I can't foresee exactly all of the ways they're going to need to change and adapt professionally? The answer must be to return to core values—to teach the commitment to excellence. If I can communicate to students that there's one standard of music-making for everything that we do—our best effort—that is the thing that will serve them well no matter how the field changes.

If I'm coaching how you play an ornament in Bach, or how you achieve a legato line in Franck, I'm not just dealing with that repertoire, I'm modeling for the student this attention to detail and integration of all of the elements of performance that they're going to have to rely on to create music in ways that I might not be able to imagine right now.

JR: Do you talk with your students about the job situation in church music?

JK: Yes, and without apology, we position our students to compete for the jobs at the top end. There the situation is quite favorable—salary, working conditions, the artistic content of the

jobs—can be very satisfying. Where our profession is really struggling is in the part-time positions, particularly in some communities where there is not a tradition of paying well for church musicians. Those aren't the kind of jobs necessarily that our graduates from the University of Michigan apply for, but they're the jobs that the majority of our professional colleagues nationally are holding.

JR: Have any of your prior students been in touch with you and communicated that a church job they were in was starting to go in the "happy-clappy" direction?

JK: Oh my, yes, sure! (laughter) But if nothing else, we can take Johann Sebastian Bach as our model—if things don't go well in a church job, you look for another one, but you don't quit the present job until you find the new job first, which is what he did!

JR: Can you discuss the imbalance of today's high level of talent, yet fewer college teaching positions and fewer upper-rank positions for church musicians?

JK: I recall something that I heard about the American jurist Daniel Webster. When he was a young man, he apparently wanted to become a lawyer. He went to his father and said, "I'm interested in the law as a profession, but it's very crowded. I'm not sure about the job prospects." His father said, "Remember—there's always room at the top." I've told that story to my students countless times. The answer for them is that they have to position themselves in terms of their abilities and their résumé and their preparation to compete at the top.

JR: How has your teaching changed over the last 25 years? Do you use different method books now?

JK: The longer I've taught, the more comfortable I've become communicating my own point of view. That's what students come to their teacher for, and ultimately it's all the teacher has to offer. I've used several method books successfully, but I keep coming back to *The Organist's Manual* (love the pun) by Roger Davis. It has a superb selection of repertoire and just the right amount of technical exercises and explanations. If students balk at the price, I explain how expensive it would be to buy all of the repertoire separately.

When I was a freshman organ major, I assumed I'd study the "canon" of great organ music. Most organ students still expect that today, but there has to be room in our canon for great, noble music by living composers, including women, and music from many cultures and traditions—African-American composers, for example.

JR: At the University of Michigan there is a scholarship fund established in your name. How's that going?

JK: It's going very well! It's endowed permanently, so we award it in perpetuity every year. It's one of a number of named scholarships that we have and it is

so necessary. You know that the costs of education are far beyond many families' ability to pay, and church musicians don't have the potential for large income after graduation the way some other fields do, so we have to have scholarship funding for our students. It's essential.

JR: That's quite a tribute. It was your students who set that up.

JK: They did, and it was done at the conclusion of the complete Bach works series that I played in 2000. It was announced at the final concert of that Bach series. They "passed the hat" at that concert, and then one of my alums, Dr. Edward Maki-Schramm, led the fund-raising, and it's done very well since.

JR: As musicology evolves there's always something new in performance practice. Do you keep integrating this with your teaching?

JK: I do, and particularly for older music—Bach and Buxtehude—there are so many questions that all of us have that must be answered just to play the piece. That's what I concentrate on—the practical performance-based decision-making that performers must face. I have gradually come to understand that some of those questions—for example, in Bach's time—had a precise answer. Whether or not I can discover it after more than 250 years is another question. Some of those questions never had a single answer. There was a range of possibilities open to the performer, and the individual performer was expected to make personal choices from that range of what was possible or appropriate.

That's what resulted in a unique personal performance, which is so vital to all music, especially Baroque music. Performing Bach or Buxtehude is more of a partnership between the composer and the performer than is true of music of some later generations. I have increasingly moved in teaching to encouraging students to identify what that range of possibilities, historically, is, and to make their own choices within that range to create a performance that might be very different from my conception of a work—or someone else's—but still faithful to the intent of the composer.

JR: Do you have an overall philosophy of performance practice?

JK: What I value most in music performance is the sense of certainty—a compelling performance, a convincing performance: "This is the way it goes!" Dr. Karl Schrock, one of my doctoral students years ago, said to me, "I think the most authentic performance is a convincing performance." I have decided that what creates that sense of being so convincing is not just making effective decisions about all of the issues of performance—registration, tempo, ornamentation, articulation, nuance—but that intuitive ability of some performers to integrate all of their choices into a single vision of the music.

That's what I concentrate on in teaching. When I judge competitions, I think that's what I respond to—not necessarily looking for somebody who plays the

piece the way I do, but who creates that sense of certainty.

JR: Some performers maintain that Bach, for instance, should be played in a certain way.

JK: Anybody who knows the nature of the historic record has to acknowledge that there is so much we don't know. The answer to so many of these questions is—we don't know. If anyone pretends to know how Bach played the organ, they're deluding themselves. We have to be intellectually honest enough to be able to say the words "I don't know."

JR: Bach was such a musician and so knowledgeable about the organ; if he had the instruments and technology we have today, would he have used them?

JK: He might have written very different music. All of these people—Bach, Buxtehude, Franck, Dan Locklair—are using the materials that they have at hand to create great music: the kind of organs, the way people play the organ, the abilities of the musicians they're working with. And because they're geniuses, they use that raw material to create great musical works. So then if, after the work is created, I depart from that, I introduce anachronisms—the word means "out of time," something that doesn't belong to the time of the composition—I weaken it.

Even though it's true that Bach might have used different sorts of organ effects that weren't available to him then, the fact is that not having had them, he wrote music that doesn't need them. Actually, by introducing them, we're weakening the musical content of what he provided us. Our generation's contribution to the understanding of performance practice has been that the music sounds best if you hear it approximately in the context of how the composer conceived it. Within that, as I said, there's so much that we don't know.

Our generation hasn't grappled with what may be the central question: if I can create a 100% authentic performance, if I could play the organ exactly as it existed, the instrument that Bach knew, in exactly the acoustics, and play every detail of the performance exactly as Bach did it, my audience would be listening to it with 21st-century ears, not 18th-century ears. As a result, it's a radically different piece of music.

We have not begun to address that limit on authenticity, and I think it's probably the next generation that's going to have to grapple with that. Our generation seems not to have been willing to think about that.

JR: One of the current trends in organ building is in the direction of larger scales and higher wind pressures—we've moved away from the Orgelbewegung and now we're in another direction. Is this a fad?

JK: The best organ builders may draw inspiration from various historic periods, but they invariably build instruments that are of their own time and their own place, and that reflect the personality of that builder. The artistic direction of the particular builder doesn't come essentially from historic models; you can learn from E. M. Skinner or Arp Schnitger or whomever, but the finest builders must gradually develop their artistic personality. I am not as interested in historic modeling as I am in the quality mechanically and tonally of the instruments, judged by contemporary standards.



James Kibbie in 1982



In 1990, back(stage) in the USSR



New Year's Eve 1991, in the USSR

JR: You have a Létourneau instrument.

JK: In my house—I'm so proud of it. We have another Létourneau at the University of Michigan. My colleague Michele Johns recently led a project to relocate that organ to a newly created small concert hall that's a joint project of the School of Music, Theatre & Dance and the School of Public Health. It will be the focus of an ongoing series of chamber music concerts and will also be used for teaching and practice. The room is great—cabaret seating, a catering kitchen, and even a rose garden.

JR: Let's talk about the instruments at the University of Michigan.

JK: Our students typically have some of their lessons on the big four-manual E. M. Skinner/Aeolian-Skinner organ in Hill Auditorium, some lessons on our Fisk in the style of Gottfried Silbermann, and some lessons on one of the two studio organs. We also have the Létourneau organ in its beautiful new hall, and we have a number of tracker and electric-action practice organs. All are pipe organs, of course. That's what students expect, and

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only a pipe organ allows for performance of the repertoire to the standards we require. We also have access to some fine organs in local churches—Ann Arbor is a great “organ town.”

JR: Did you choose a Létourneau for yourself because of the one at the university?

JK: Yes, and because I had worked as consultant on a number of projects where Létourneau had been the builder chosen, and I developed a particular fondness and respect for his instruments. When I got this house organ in 2000, I wanted to make a little recording—sort of like a baby picture, you know, the proud parent!—so I recorded a partita Hugo Distler had written for his own house organ and put it on my website as a free download at Christmas time. That began what’s now an annual tradition.

JR: Your Christmas card!

JK: Yes! And I tracked the month-by-month downloads for those various recordings, and where the requests for downloads were coming from. It’s phenomenal, the number of people that month after month download these little house organ recordings—from Romania, China, western Europe, South Africa—all over the world! That’s what alerted me to the importance of this field of Internet downloads, and it’s one of the things that made me decide to release the Bach recordings as free Internet downloads rather than as commercial CDs.

JR: Do you have a grant for the Bach recordings?

JK: It’s very expensive, about \$60,000



James Kibbie at the Létourneau organ in his home

over three years to make the recordings, plus the expenses connected with the website. I puzzled a long time over how it could be possible. Then Dr. Barbara Sloat came to see me. I hadn’t met her before, but she explained she wanted to do something to honor her husband Barry, who was nearing the end of his life. He had attended all 18 recitals in the complete Bach series I had given at the University of Michigan in 2000. She wanted particularly to recognize Barry’s interest in the organ and in Bach, and she offered a very generous donation toward my Bach recording project. The University of Michigan has provided the remainder of the funding.

It’s a three-year project to record the complete organ works of Bach on historic 18th-century organs in Germany. As the recordings are made and mastered, they’re put on this website (www.blocknrecordings.com), sponsored by the University of Michigan, so that they can just be downloaded free by anybody, anywhere in the world.

JR: Your project is recording Bach on historic instruments. What were the criteria you used for choosing instruments to record on?

JK: There’s no single “Bach organ,” because he wrote for such different instruments over the course of his life, from the North German organs he knew in his youth to the late Baroque organs of his Leipzig years. I haven’t tried to make my recordings an anthology of historic organs. I’ve chosen a limited number of instruments, so I can deal with each instrument in detail. The 2007 recordings are on three Silbermann organs, the one-manual and two-manual instruments in Rötha, and the magnificent three-manual organ in the Dresden Kathedrale. About seven hours of repertoire on these organs is now posted on the website.

JR: Robert Clark recorded on the organ at Naumburg. Is that one of the instruments?

JK: No, instead I’m using two Trost organs next year that have a similar late-Baroque character, in Waltershausen and Grossengottern. But I love that recording of Robert Clark! I think the performer, the repertoire and the organ all match perfectly. He must have thought a long time in putting it together—select-

ing not only the organ, but the pieces that would go with the organ and go with him and what he wanted to do. I think it’s one of the great Bach recordings.

JR: What will you tackle next after your Bach project on the Internet?

JK: Bach is enough to think about

right now, but I’ve already decided that my reward in 2009, when I finish all of the Bach recordings, is going to be particularly to go back to the organ works of Franck. It’s been several years since I’ve performed *Grande pièce symphonique*, for example. I’ve performed all of the Franck works, but I’m looking forward to going back to them as a sort of reward for finishing the Bach project.

JR: Do you have any favorite instruments that you like to play, besides your own?

JK: Instruments that belong to the time and place where they were built, not instruments that try to do everything, but instruments that do one thing, or one slice of the pie, particularly well. If you have a beautiful instrument, it lends its beauty and its integrity to anything that you play on it. Silbermann never thought of his organs playing anything other than contemporary music—music of 18th-century Germany—and yet churches with Silbermann organs have very multifaceted musical programs, and the organ is central to that music program now in the 21st century as much as it was in the 18th, in ways that Silbermann couldn’t imagine. Because the instrument is so beautiful and so well built, it becomes flexible over time.

JR: Do you have an overall hopeful view of the organ world, especially in our culture? Ours is a culture of mediocrity, feeding off the bottom. How do we who feed off more lofty things deal with this?

JK: I’m enormously optimistic. The level of organ performance right now in this country is the highest that it’s been, I think anywhere, historically. The students, particularly the undergraduate students that we’re getting at the University of Michigan, are some of the finest talents that we’ve ever had. The quality of organ building is as high as it’s ever been in this country; there are new pipe organs being built all the time, including some really significant instruments in high-visibility venues. I am not worried!

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