

A Tribute to Grigg Fountain upon his 90th birthday

Compiled by Marilyn Biery

Grigg Fountain was born in October, 1918, in Bishopville, South Carolina. He attended Wake Forest College for a year and received a B.A. in music from Furman University (1939). He continued his training in music, earning both B.M. and M.M. degrees in church music and organ from Yale University (1943), studying with Luther Noss. He also had private organ studies with Arthur Poister (1945) and Marcel Dupré (1946). He studied Baroque organ literature with Helmut Walcha in Frankfurt-Am-Main, Germany, on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1953–54. From 1946–1961 he was on the faculty at Oberlin Conservatory of Music. In 1961 he was appointed professor of organ and church music in the School of Music at Northwestern University, from which he retired as Emeritus in August 1986. During that time he was also organist and choirmaster at Alice Millar Chapel, on the Northwestern campus. Grigg and Helen Erday Fountain celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on April 2, 2009, a union that produced four children—Bruce, John, Drew, and Suzanne—and eight grandchildren. Helen passed away on October 12, 2009. They maintained homes in Port Isabel, Texas, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

It's difficult to believe that Grigg Fountain could actually, finally, be 90 years old. He told everyone that he was 115, and had been married for 70 years. And, of course, those of us who were tender students, thinking he was terribly old already, had little trouble (almost) believing him. But now that he has nearly reached the age that he joked about, those of us who know and love and admire him have taken a moment to stop and write about the man who inspired in us such fierce loyalty, passionate music-making, dedicated yet loving eye-rolling, and complete admiration—a musician whose life and career was spent in joyful and hell-bent exploration of all that makes music vital and compelling.

Grigg was known for unusual techniques both as an organ teacher and a choral conductor. Some of them were adapted from skills he learned from working with Robert Shaw at the First Unitarian Church in Shaker Heights, Ohio. It is not possible to touch upon more than a few of them, since he was continually experimenting with techniques and musical ideas, but here are some that recurred with regularity:

- Rehearsing choirs on syllables (noo, nah, bum, bim, too, etc.) to acquire evenness of tone, precise rhythm, and beauty of vowels
- Rehearsing choirs on subdivisions either by having them count (one-and, two-and, three-and, four-and) or by using the above syllables and breaking down the rhythm to the smallest division in order to “get inside” the notes and phrases
- Constantly insisting on musical phrases that had direction
- Rehearsing choirs totally without piano assistance all the time, at every rehearsal, with any choir he was conducting, from the 60-voice Chapel Choir to the 15-voice Bahá'í Choir
- Teaching organists to play hymns by having them play three parts and sing the fourth, by having them put the melody in the pedals and bass line in the left hand, and STILL play the other two parts (or perhaps sing the alto and play the tenor in the right hand), so that you knew what was going on with every single note of the hymn
- Teaching organists to play hymns, and then all literature, by leading with the pedals, which creates a powerful propulsion of the manual technique
- Spending an entire lesson, or sometimes an entire quarter, on the first phrase of a piece, with the expectation that the



Grigg Fountain (courtesy Northwestern University Archives)

student or choir would then apply the lesson learned to the rest of the piece

- Having students practice with the metronome on the off-beats, which creates a dance-like step, particularly in Baroque music, and enables precise and infectious rhythm (Richard Enright did this too—I'm not sure who influenced whom on this one)

- Teaching a student to perfect a difficult, lyric pedal solo by first having them play the pedal solo with the right hand, then with the pedal (silent) playing with the right hand, then dropping out the right hand and repeating these steps until the student could play the pedal solo as well with the feet as they could with the fingers (try this with the Messiaen *Serene Alleluias*).

Grigg also had at least two regular, non-credit classes: the hymn-playing class of his studio that met weekly to play hymns in the ways mentioned above, plus as many ways as Grigg could imagine, and probably with a hymnal on their heads, and the “Wizards,” comprising aspiring conductors, who were given instruction in conducting hymns as well as the opportunity to conduct the Chapel Choir during services.

It's Grigg's voice that I heard in my ear for years after studying with him in the early 1980s. “Now, now, now Marilyn, is THAT how you wanted that phrase to sound?” “Marilyn, is the choir doing EXACTLY what you want them to do?” I couldn't practice the organ without hearing his voice, challenging and encouraging, and I took that voice with me from Illinois to Connecticut to Minnesota. From Grigg I learned how to make my feet play phrases on the pedals to rival phrases I could sing or play with my hands, how to play hymns that sang, and how to pay attention to every single note I play, sing, conduct, or write. He was the teacher whose presence and style was so vivid and compelling, most of us who experienced it have never forgotten it, nor ceased to be grateful. So, to you, Grigg Fountain, organist, choir-director, mentor, professor, church musician, friend, here are a few tributes from those who know you well, and love you anyway:

Dear Grigg,

What better occasion than your 90th birthday to pay tribute to a professor who consistently went beyond his duties to become a true mentor, advisor, and friend? You are a remarkable man. Others may write about the mark you have made in your field. I write about the one you have left on my heart.

Church music should uplift and edify, you said. Words to cherish. Your knowl-



Dedication of the Alice Millar Chapel organ, 1964, with Benn Gibson turning pages. James Hopkins was conductor (not in picture) (courtesy Northwestern University Archives)

edge of it was unrivalled, your enthusiasm contagious. You conveyed your passion so convincingly that it became mine, too. It is impossible to sing a hymn in church today without thinking of you.

Your ‘forgettery’ is legendary. It is striking that you still recall the smallest details about former choir members, how you cite sources for the vast, varied store of information you so readily share. I love your insatiable curiosity.

In the years since NU, I have been fortunate to get to know not only the mentor, but the man. The persona of those days seems only a veneer of the man you are: the sense of humor, the eccentricity perhaps exaggerated then to give you room in an environment that otherwise might have restricted you. The depth of your generosity, decency, and formidable intellect were sometimes obscured by irrepressible charm, affability, and an inexhaustible supply of intricately detailed stories in true southern tradition.

The greatest lesson you taught me was not musical, but human. When you learned that I was unable to finance further studies, you took me by the hand. You did not let it go until we arrived at the dean's office, where you arranged everything. You showed me what kindness, grace, and mercy were about. What better example could you wish to live? What better legacy could you wish to leave?

With thanks and love,
Alisa

Alisa Kasmir was a student of vocal performance at Northwestern and member of its Chapel Choir under the direction of Grigg Fountain from 1978–1984. She now resides in Holland but maintains frequent phone contact with Grigg. Last year they planned the music together for the Maundy Thursday service at St. Mary's Anglican and Episcopal Church in Rotterdam, where Alisa still sings an occasional solo and knows where the on/off switch on the organ is!

Dear Grigg,

Are you sure? How many times have you stopped unsuspecting students, faculty or even passersby to query, “Are you sure?” My answer is, yes, I am sure; you are truly part of Alice Millar Chapel and Northwestern University lore. And now you head into your 90s, and one wonders if you are still quite the character we knew you to be.

You spoke in a word order that led one to believe your native tongue had been German instead of South Carolinian. And after working with you for some

twenty-three years, I heard myself saying one day that “the clouds in the sky look ominous.”

You spoke to your students and sometimes to co-workers in illustrations. To the organ student, “You have to treat a memory slip as you would a skidding car—go with the skid, bring yourself back and move on.”

I shall always think of you as an educator at heart. You so wanted us to understand why a hymn's phrasing was important—a hallmark of your congregational organ playing. And to this day some hymns shall always be “right” only when played in a *Fountainesque* manner.

And, of course, we all remember you taught playing with a minimum of extraneous movement; no dramatic swooping over the keys for you. Your students learned to play while balancing a hymnal on the head. (I, in turn, tried typing and using the Dictaphone pedal while balancing a hymnal on my head.)

Ah, the memories and tales are endless. Thanks to you, I have a store of wonderful Fountain memories that will always make me smile.

Affectionately,
Margaret-at-the-desk

Margie Verhulst began working at Alice Millar Chapel in 1963, the start of what would be 40 years working in the chapel office. She met her husband, Walter Bradford, who was learning the ropes as an organ builder, at the chapel. Now retired, she can simply enjoy the continuing fine music at Millar without typing choir notes or scheduling organ practice. She also has the luxury of looking back on those days with great joy and gratitude. This is a brief glimpse of Marge Verhulst Bradford, a.k.a. Margaret-at-the-desk.

Most esteemed and honored Herr Kappellmeister,

As you may remember, we met in the spring of my junior year at Northwestern, when you played my *Carol Suite* with flutist Darlene Drew at a Millar service. You promptly rechristened me “Evangelical,” and I found myself in the Chapel Choir the following fall.

Through you, Northwestern opened to me in a new way. You suggested that I use the Chapel Oratory—the “Prophet's Chamber,” as you called it—as a composition studio a few times a week. And you provided an introduction to Alan Stout, who became my *Kompositionslehrer*. Two years in Chapel Choir transformed choral singing for me; all subsequent choral experiences seemed tame and dull. Music-making at Millar was dy-



Grigg Fountain, with Christine Kraemer at the organ and the Chapel Choir (courtesy Northwestern University Archives)



David Evan Thomas with Grigg at Griggfest (Grigg's retirement concert and festivities), June 1986 (from David Evan Thomas)

namic, as you collaborated with staff, organists, and singers on a new worship experience each week. It was a community, not just an ensemble. From you I learned to think about the Why of singing, not just the How, and to think creatively about how music serves a larger purpose. Your conducting technique was inimitable—though many of us did our honest best to imitate you; I even tried to apply it to Gilbert & Sullivan—but the music you pulled from us transcended technique. At its best, it was prayer, pure laughter, hallelujah.

For all the opportunities you gave me to sing, conduct, arrange, play the trumpet or the organ, perhaps your greatest gift to me, Grigg, was the seriousness with which you treated me as a composer, young as I was. For one December Sunday in 1979, you requested brass settings for “St. Denio.” On short notice, I cranked out a noisy, festive arrangement, which went off with aplomb. As I walked around campus later that day, I felt newly born as a composer. Later that year, I gave an unconventional senior recital in the chapel, with you graciously playing the organ, and members of the Chapel Choir on loan. You helped set me on a path I haven’t strayed from since.

I’ve been going through old Millar recordings, and I have memorable dubs of Brahms’s “Lass dich,” Britten’s *Te Deum*, and the Lutkin “Benediction,” as well as the big pieces from my years: Rachmaninoff, Schönberg, Bruckner. Thank you for all those experiences, now memories that haven’t lost any of their sweetness or power. But there is one little recording I prize, because it documents our work together: Krebs’s setting of “Wachet auf.” I’m playing the tune serenely on the trumpet; you’re playing a giggling trio on the Millar organ.

Let Krebs’s ditty be a toast to you in your 90s: a gently carbonated spiritual cocktail, a happy mixture of humor and gravity, shaken lightly.

David Evan Thomas
(a.k.a. David Evangelical Thomas)

David Evan Thomas was a member of the Alice Millar Chapel Choir as an undergraduate at Northwestern, from 1979–1981. He studied subsequently at Eastman and the University of Minnesota. From 2003–2005, he was composer-in-residence at the Cathed-

ral of St. Paul, working with James and Marilyn Biery. Thomas’s music has been performed by the Minnesota Orchestra and the Westminster Cathedral Choir, and has been recognized by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Thomas lives in Minneapolis, where he is still singing.

Dear Grigg,

In your ninetieth year, although I am sure you will insist that you are at least 115, it is a good and proper exercise to reflect on all that you have given me—given all of us, who have had the good fortune to work with you. You shared your knowledge, also your craft, and most of all your passion for making music not just notes. You are teacher, colleague, and friend all at the same time, because I am still learning and sharing, while always enjoying your company.

There are three hallmarks of your teaching that constantly inspire me. You have a keen sense of hearing and listening. This seems so basic, but you heard both where the “sound” was, whether in choir or on the organ, and you knew how to get it to where it would transcend the bounds of the page. I will never forget you saying about one of your graduate students after a performance he did, “Well, that is not the way I would have done it, BUT it had complete validity.” You wanted us to become our own artists and not just clones. And I watched you agonize from week to week about seating plans for the choir and how to make small ensembles that utilized everyone, not just the strongest voices or musicians. “Maybe if I put her next to him, her musicianship will rub off on his voice, and



Grigg conducting in the Alice Millar basement (courtesy Northwestern University Archives)

his tone will improve her singing.” You made each of us feel that we were important as individuals and to the entire ensemble. Finally, I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard you say, “Now ladies and gentlemen, that is in tune and in time, BUT IT DOESN’T MAKE THE HAIR ON THE BACK OF MY NECK STAND UP!” You refused to let us get away with cold music-making and phrasing—ever.

Thanks for all the inspiration and joy you have given and still give to all of us.
Kooort (Kurt R. Hansen)

Kurt Hansen first met Grigg in the fall of his freshman year, 1964, at his Chapel Choir audition. Kurt was in the Chapel Choir from 1964 to 1968, and after a four-year “vacation” in the Air Force band program, rejoined the Chapel



Choir in the fall of 1972 when he returned to grad school; he stayed until Grigg’s retirement in 1986. Kurt started as choir librarian, turned pages for Grigg’s preludes and postludes, became a conducting student, participated in “Wizards,” was a grad assistant, assistant conductor, and vocal/language coach. Kurt is delighted to call Grigg his mentor and friend.

Dear Grigg,

When I was appointed as a full-time faculty member of the Northwestern University School of Music in 1962, I was absolutely elated. This was my first teaching position, and of course Northwestern was the “plum” of the appointments that year. I was already well aware of the excellent reputation of the school in general, and was particularly happy to be working in a university with such a



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Kurt Hansen (left) and Grigg, June 1986 Griggfest, with Helen Fountain (facing Grigg) and Drew Fountain (right) (From David Evan Thomas)

strong organ and church music program. Shortly before my move to Evanston, a friend talked about the remarkable talents and virtues of another recent appointment, Grigg Fountain. I was encouraged to seek you out, as you were “a truly unique” individual.

Soon after my arrival, I investigated the various church programs in the vicinity of the university. I decided that the most interesting was in fact the university church service, led by the university chaplain, with choral and organ music under your direction. At that time, the services were held in Lutkin Hall, a music auditorium named after famed musician Peter Christian Lutkin of ‘benediction’ fame. At my first visit to these services, my reaction was mixed: the organ music was very good in spite of the old, very ordinary Casavant organ, an instrument whose only claim to fame was that, at some earlier time, André Marchal had given a recital on it. The choir and the sermon were also good, but the surroundings— theater seating, a stage, very little Christian art or decor—made the experience less than totally satisfactory. In talking with you afterward, you expressed your great frustration with having to produce music on such an inadequate, poorly maintained organ.

I continued attending church in Lutkin, feeling more at home each time and more in tune with the ethos as I got to know more students, faculty, and you. My attendance was soon rewarded by what I can only describe as “the most extraordinary virtuoso performance” I have ever witnessed.

For most people, a “virtuoso” musical performance is one in which a very dif-

ficult work is performed. Usually, such a work involves an incredible number of notes (usually very fast notes), advanced techniques, a dazzling display of physical or musical prowess or endurance, etc. At the service in question, you did indeed give a dazzling performance at the organ. You had carefully investigated each and every problem, defect or weakness of the instrument. You knew which keys stuck, which pipes spoke slowly, which valves shut slowly, which specific notes were painfully out of tune, which pistons were unreliable, and so forth.

At the organ offertory, you played a piece during which you were able to feature each and every one of these problems! You had worked out special fingering so that getting to each sticky key, out-of-tune note or other unfortunate musical situation was treated in a rather flamboyant way. “Let the worshipper see just what I have to endure with this terrible instrument” must have been your guiding incentive. Even the non-musicians had to have realized that what they were hearing was just plain awful. Immediately afterward, you stepped to the podium to ask for forgiveness, explaining rather sheepishly that you had done the best you could under such trying circumstances. You then expressed your profound desire that the university get a new, adequate instrument for your good, and the good of all humanity.

One was hard-pressed to know whether to cry or laugh, whether to applaud or boo. Whatever one’s reaction, the performance was memorable—and totally VIRTUOSO.

James Hopkins



Richard Enright, Wolfgang Rübsam and Grigg Fountain (counterclockwise), Alice Millar (Uldis Saule, ION Photographics) (courtesy Northwestern University Archives)

James Hopkins, AAGO, taught music composition at Northwestern 1962–66, after receiving his M.M. degree from Yale, and returned in 1968–71 after completing the PhD at Princeton. He composed and arranged music for various instrumental and choral ensembles for use in services at Alice Millar Chapel while the organ was being installed. He is now Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Southern California, where he taught from 1971–2005. His catalog includes many works for choral ensembles, organ solo, organ duet, and many other combinations. His Concierto de los Angeles was the first organ work to be heard in a public concert at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

Dear Grigg,

I have so many vivid memories of my four years with you at Northwestern, but I can’t help but focus on those first few weeks as a timid and frightened freshman. I knew that studying organ with you was going to be an unusual experience when, in the course of determining bench height and position at the console, you asked me “What kind of underwear do you wear, boxers or briefs?” I don’t think many organ professors ask that question of new students. (Apparently boxer shorts offer a convenient way to gauge one’s front-to-back position on the bench.)

You may not remember, but my freshman year was the year that you doggedly attempted to teach us that all music—and particularly Baroque music—relates to dance. (This was part of your pedagogical genius: there was always some sort of overarching concept or theme that held together a lesson, rehearsal, or often, as in this case, an entire year.) I



Grigg Fountain lesson with freshman James Biery, Alice Millar Chapel, 1974 (Uldis Saule, ION Photographics) (courtesy Northwestern University Archives)

still chuckle when I recall our organ class one day, singly and in groups, in the Millar Chapel gallery, gamely attempting to dance “Der Tag, der ist so freudenreich” from the *Orgelbüchlein*.

As I look back upon my career as a church musician, I am particularly grateful for the complete musical education I received from you at Northwestern. For centuries, the art of the organist, and the church musician, was set apart from other musical disciplines by the expectation that the organist would master all the facets of music-making: performance, improvisation, score-reading, transposition, composition, conducting, voice training, diplomacy, and so on. You provided a remarkable environment at Millar Chapel that offered constant opportunities to learn and practice all these skills. And we were allowed, yes encouraged, to experiment in so many different ways. Those vocal improvisations, with flute-celeste clusters sustained by pencils in the keys, are not something I have ever found a practical use for, but they planted the seeds for me to develop organ improvisational skills on my own after leaving Northwestern. Thank you for encouraging all of us to sing, to conduct, to prepare hymn settings, and above all to value the skills and talents of others.

I am also grateful for your unique ability to teach students to teach themselves. Yes, we would spend an entire hour at the organ picking apart the first measure of a Bach toccata. But the real learning occurred in the seven days following, when we were expected to apply that knowledge, in the practice room, to the rest of the piece—and then, in subsequent years, to apply it to other works in the same genre. In a very real sense, you continue to teach me to play the organ every day.

Best wishes, and thanks for everything, as you sail into your tenth decade.

James Russell Lowell Biery

James Biery received a B.Mus. in organ from Northwestern in 1978, successfully managing to play enough complete pieces to finish a senior recital under Grigg’s tutelage. He ate donuts with the Millar Chapel Choir every Sunday morning of his four undergraduate years, and did some singing, conducting, and organ playing, too. After receiving another Northwestern organ degree, he went on to play the organ and teach choirs to “bum” and “nah” at a parish church and two cathedrals. He and Marilyn Biery now ply their trade at the Cathedral of Saint Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Marilyn Perkins Biery received B.M. and M.M. degrees in organ performance from Northwestern, where her graduate study was with Grigg, for whom she was also graduate assistant at the Alice Millar Chapel in 1981–82. Marilyn spent four undergraduate years in the well-behaved Richard Enright studio, watching the Grigg students have fun running out for ice cream during studio class, sit askew in the chapel pews, and behave like the fun-loving, eccentric organ students they were, so she decided to become one herself (and marry one). Marilyn is now at the Cathedral of Saint Paul, in St. Paul, MN, where she and James Biery carry on as many Grigg traditions as possible.

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