A Tribute to Grigg Fountain upon his 90th birthday

Grigg Fountain was born in October, 1910, in Spartanburg, South Carolina. He attended Wake Forest College for a year and received a B.A. in music from Furman University (1936). 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 Fonter (1945) and Marcel Dupuy (1946). He studied in organ literature with Helmut Wadleigh 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 Erley Fountain celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on April 2, 2009, a union that produced four children—Bruce, John, Dorothy, and Suzanne—and eight grandchildren. Helen passed away on October 12, 2013. They are buried together in Fort Isabel, Texas, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

It’s difficult to believe that Grigg Fountain could be so strong and so healthy already, had little trouble (almost) believing him. But now that he has nearly reached the age that he jokingly said, the telephone is the only language and admirers have taken a moment to stop and write about the man who inspired us with such fierce loyalty, passionate music-making, dedicated yet loving eye-rolling, and complete devotion to a musician whose life and career were spent in joyful and bestowal exploration of all that makes music vital and compelling. Grigg was known for unusual techniques, often leading a choir and a chorale 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 was not a church upon more than a few of them, since he was continually experimenting with techniques but here are some that recurrent with regularity. Such as playing on syllables (noo, nah, bum, bim, too) to acquire even-"nless of tone, precise rhythm, and beauty of sound. Playing hymns by the metronome on the off-beat, 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."

"For you to sing to perfect a difficult, lyrical pedal solo by first having then 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 as with the feel that as they could with the fingers (try this with the Messiah Scene Aria Bloitjs)."

Grigg 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 aspiring conductors, who were given instruction in conducting hymns as well as organ literature for the church today without thinking of you. The depth of your generosity, decency, and formidable intellect were sometimes obscured by irrepressible charm, affectation, and an inextinguishable 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 Kovner was a student of word performance at Northwestern and member of its Chapel Choir under the direction of Grigg Fountain from 1978–1994. She now resides in New Mexico.

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

Margot Verhulst began working at Alice Millar 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 free music at Millar without type- ing 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 Margot 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 your junior year at Northwestern, when you played my Carousel Suite with flutist Darlene Drew at a Millar service. You promptly rechristened me “Evangelical,” and I found myself in the Chapel Choir the following year. Through you, Northwesterners opened to us a new way. You suggested that I use the Chapel Oratory—the “Prophet’s Chamber,” as you called it—as a composition studio for a few weeks. And you provided an introduction to Alan Stout of the English Kirigrafenmadler. Two years in Chapel Choir transformed choral singing for me; all subsequent performances were in the same name and thrill. Music-making at Millar was dy-

Margaret-at-the-desk

Affectionately,

Margaret-at-the-desk

Compiled by Marilyn Biery
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—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 a 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 musico-technique will rub off on his voice, and his voice will improve her singing.”

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. Denis.” 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 at the University School of Music in 1962, I was fortunate to work with you. You shared your gift of making music—ever.

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

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

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. Kurt started as choir librarian, turned pages for Grigg’s preludes and postludes, became a conducting student, participated in “Wizards,” was a good assistant, assistant conductor, and vocal language coach. Kurt is delighted to call Grigg his mentor and friend.

Custom Builder of organs, combination organs, and all digital organs

Wicks Organ Company

1100 5th St.
Highland IL 62249

877-654-2191

www.wicks.com

1979, you requested brass settings for “St. Denis.” 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 at the University School of Music in 1962, I was fortunate to work with you. You shared your gift of making music—ever.

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
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 Benedicton fame. At my first visit to these services, my reaction was one of admiration: 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. 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 irreparable, 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 tricky 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 under such trying circumstances. You non-musicians had to have realized that what they were hearing was just plain non-musical! You had worked out special fingering so that getting to each tricky key, out of tune or other unfortunate musical situation was treated in a rather flamboyant way. "Let the worshipper see just what I have to endure under such trying circumstances. You non-musicians had to have realized that what they were hearing was just plain non-musical. Whatever one's reaction, you had done the best you could 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 irreparable, 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 tricky 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 under such trying circumstances. You non-musicians had to have realized that what they were hearing was just plain non-musical. Whatever one's reaction, you had done the best you could give a dazzling performance at the organ.

For most people, a "virtuoso" musical performance is one in which a very difficult 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 irreparable, 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 tricky 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 under such trying circumstances. You non-musicians had to have realized that what they were hearing was just plain non-musical. Whatever one's reaction, you had done the best you could 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 irreparable, 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 tricky 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 under such trying circumstances. You non-musicians had to have realized that what they were hearing was just plain non-musical. Whatever one's reaction, you had done the best you could give a dazzling performance at the organ.

The new pipe-digital combination organ at Masland Methodist Church in Sibu, Malaysia draws all eyes to the central cross, where the surrounding pipes are arranged like uplifted hands. Rodgers Instruments Corporation was honored to partner with Modern Pipe Organ Solutions of the U.K. on the installation.

See more pictures at www.rodderins.ruiments.com. For more information about Rodgers pipe-digital combination organs, contact Sales Manager Rick Anderson at 503-681-0483.

James Hopkins, AAGO, taught music composition at Northwestern 1965–66, after receiving his M.M. degree from Yale, and returned in 1967–71 after completing the Ph.D. 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 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.)

For centuries, the art of the organist, performance, improvisation, scoring—transposition, composition, conducting, voice training—has been the domain of the professional. Today, with the organist's virtuosity now available to the average person in the form of pipe-digital combinations, anyone can learn to "bum" and "nah" at a parish church and 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 is now director with the Millar Chapel Choir every Sunday morning of his fourth undergraduate year, and did some singing, conducting, and organ playing, too. After receiving another Northwestern organ degree, he went on to play the organ for the New York society to "bump" and "nah" at a parish church and two cathedrals. He and Marilyn Biery now ply their trade at the Cathedral of St 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 assistant at the Alice Millar Chapel in 1981–82. Marilyn spent four undergraduate years, and did some singing, conducting, and organ playing, too. After receiving another Northwestern organ degree, she went on to play the organ for the New York society to "bump" and "nah" at a parish church and two cathedrals. He and Marilyn Biery now ply their trade at the Cathedral of St Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Still, the same genre. In a very real sense, you planted the seeds for me to develop or-gano improvisational skills in the organ. While the organ was being installed. As I look back upon my career as a church organist, 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, scoring—transposition, composition, conducting, voice training—all by himself. Today, with the organist's virtuosity now available to the average person in the form of pipe-digital combinations, anyone can learn to "bump" and "nah" at a parish church and continue to teach me to play the organ every day.