

**American Guild of Organists Presentation:**  
**"LEADING LADIES...LASTING LEGAGIES:**  
**Emma Lou Diemer, Marilyn Mason, Alice Parker**  
**Presenter: Dr. Darlene Kuperus**

Thank you so much to the Atlanta AGO 2020 Steering Committee for their invitation to present at the National Convention originally to be held in July. "A Kaleidoscope of Color and Sound" was the theme of this year's convention. It included a focus on the contributions of women in our field. This paper is a short synopsis of that presentation as part of the online convention.

In the March 2020 edition of *The American Organist* (TAO) magazine, the AGO Executive Director James E. Thomashower titled his article "Atlanta AGO Convention Celebrates the Gifts of Women." His remarks were made during Women's History month. He acknowledged the impressive number of women who were contributing to this year's convention. He listed by name the composers, performers, worship leaders, workshop presenters and the convention steering committee chairs who were working towards creating a stellar National AGO Convention in Atlanta. It is a long and impressive list!

In the May 2020 TAO, we heard AGO President Michael Bedford encourage the guild membership with these words as we began to deal with the ramifications of the pandemic: "Set back or progress? I vote for progress. Now is the time to *thrive on resiliency*. Now is the time to take advantage of the fact that we can still be creative and productive."

My presentation focuses on the gifts of three women who have had a profound impact on our profession. When I reflect on the lives of Emma Lou Diemer, Marilyn Mason and Alice Parker I would contend that *resiliency* is a common attribute. Their careers have displayed unwavering persistence and devotion to their craft. Very early in their careers they were leaders at a time when women's gifts were not typically affirmed by societal "norms." In fact, the voices of women in the work force were often silenced in order to make way for men. This did not stop them from becoming trailblazers in their field.

They each started their careers in the days that followed WWII when so many things in America began to thrive again. After the devastation of two world wars, people were hungry for education, for concerts and choral societies. As a result there was a great demand for newly composed choir anthems, advances in hymnody, and the pipe organ leading in church music and in concerts. It is this context that these women began their highly successful careers.

Their long lives devoted to creating music and inspiring others to participate in music have served them well. Emma Lou Diemer is 92. Alice Parker is 94. They are both still active in their careers. Marilyn Mason died in April, 2019 and was just shy of 95. She spent an unprecedented 66 years on the faculty at the University of Michigan. Fifty-eight of those years she served as chair of the organ department.

## **RECOGNITION BY THE AGO**

These women have each received high honors from our own guild. The AGO Committee on New Music sponsors the *Marilyn Mason Award in Organ Composition* at each National Convention. The new solo organ work is performed during the convention and then published by Hinshaw. The AGO/New York City Chapter named Marilyn Mason *Performer of the Year* in 1989.

The AGO *Distinguished Composer* award went to Emma Lou Diemer in 1995. She has composed many new organ solo works that have been premiered at National Conventions. For the Kansas City 2018 convention she composed "Remembrance" as part of the convention theme focused on the 100th anniversary of the end of WW I. In 2016 she was commissioned to compose an organ work for the convention in Houston titled "Hommage to Bach and Widor".

The AGO *Distinguished Composer* award went to Alice Parker in 2000. Choral anthems by Alice Parker are frequently part of choral concerts and worship services at our conventions.

So, who are these leading ladies? What are their legacies to us? How do their careers inform our own? This is a very shortened version of my presentation (unfortunately without power point photos and audio music examples) that will give you a quick glimpse of their careers.

## **EMMA LOU DIEMER**

Emma Lou Diemer (b. November 24, 1927 in Kansas City) is a composer, professor of music (emeritus), concert artist (organ, harpsichord and piano), and served as a church organist for over 70 years. She majored in composition at the Yale Music School (BM, 1949; MM, 1950) and at the Eastman School of Music (Ph.D, 1960). She studied in Brussels, Belgium on a Fulbright Scholarship and spent two summers of composition study at the Berkshire Music Center. She taught in several colleges and was organist at several churches in the Kansas City area during the 1950s.

In 1965 she joined the faculty of the University of Maryland where she taught composition and theory from 1965-70. In 1971 she moved from the East Coast to teach composition and theory at the University of California, Santa Barbara. At UCSB she was instrumental in founding the electronic/computer music program. She was a leader in new forms of music and composition.

Diemer has composed over 1000 organ works. Many are hymn based. She has written a *Concerto in One Movement for Organ and Chamber Orchestra* subtitled "Alaska". And most coincidentally Marilyn Mason was the organist for its recording.

Diemer has written many works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, keyboard, voice, chorus, and electronic media. She has written numerous hymns, several of which appear in church hymnals. Through the years she has fulfilled many commissions (orchestral, chamber ensemble, keyboard, choral, vocal) from schools, churches, and professional organizations. She was commissioned by Marilyn Mason to contribute to the Marilyn Mason Music Library, vol. 4 (published by Morning Star) The piece she wrote is "Variations on Endless Song".

She is an active keyboard performer (piano, organ, harpsichord, synthesizer), and in the last few years has given concerts of her own music at Washington National Cathedral, St. Mary's Cathedral and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, and elsewhere.

## **ALICE PARKER**

Alice Parker (b. Dec. 16, 1925 in Boston) is an internationally renowned composer, conductor, teacher and clinician. Parker studied composition and conducting at Smith College and the Juilliard School where she began her long association with Robert Shaw. The many Parker/Shaw settings of American folksongs, hymns and spirituals from that period form an enduring repertoire for choruses all around the world.

Her list of published compositions has over five hundred titles, ranging from operas through song cycles, cantatas and choral suites to many individual anthems. She has been commissioned by hundreds of community, school and church choruses, and her works appear in the catalogs of a dozen publishing companies. Through her compositions and choral workshops she has made an enormous impact on American choral music for the past 70 years.

Each year she tours the United States and Canada, leading performances and workshops on improvisation, rehearsal techniques and score study. To take part in one of her SINGS is to have a rare experience of group improvisation in singing, remarkable for its high level of musical sound.

In 1985, with the founding of *Melodious Accord Inc.*, she focused her activities on the heart of vocal music: the melody. The musicians of *Melodious Accord*, a sixteen-voice professional chorus, have released fourteen albums in the last two decades.

Through the Melodious Accord Fellowship Program, mid-career professional musicians are brought together for inspiration and refreshment in their teaching, composing and conducting under her mentorship. The organization also sponsors workshops, symposia, Parker appearances, and publishes an e-Newsletter.

The second edition of her classic essays on song leading and congregational singing, *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church*, appeared in 2013. In it she states, "Sound is a marvelous gift of God and when we sing together in common we affirm our common humanity and build our community through this shared craft. Good singing is not the result of a good congregation but the forging of it."

Alice Parker has served on the Board of Directors of Chorus America and was named their first Director Laureate. In 2013 she received the Robert Shaw Award from the American Choral Directors Association. She is also a Fellow of the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada. She is the recipient of six honorary doctorates and the Smith College Medal. She has received grants from ASCAP, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Aaron Copland Fund for Music

A recent book about her life is titled *The Melodic Voice: Conversations with Alice Parker*. by Cameron LaBarr and John Wykoff ( GIA Publications). The book includes access to more than three hours of video interviews with Alice Parker.

## **MARILYN MASON**

Marilyn Mason (b. June 29, 1925 Oklahoma; d. April, 2019). was the University Organist, Professor of Music, and Chair of the Organ Department of the University of Michigan. Her affiliation with Michigan began in 1944 as she began her undergraduate studies there under Palmer Christian, later completing her M.Mus degree. And, except for a year spent in France, where she studied under Nadia Boulanger (analysis) and Maurice Duruflé (organ) and time studying for her Doctor of Sacred Music degree at Union Theological seminary in New York, she spent her entire career in Ann Arbor.

Mason commissioned over 75 new compositions for the pipe organ. Part of her legacy is a series of 7 volumes titled "Marilyn Mason Music Library". These represent a portion of the organ works that she commissioned. It was a priority in her performing career to play works of living composers. Many great composers of the 20th century wrote organ music for her to perform: Albright, Bolcom, Cowell, Diemer, David Johnson, Langlais, Lockwood, Gerald Near, Persichetti, and Sowerby.

She was the consultant for many churches seeking to build a pipe organ for their sanctuary. Many of these instruments are mechanical action. She ensured that the pipe organs at First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor (1984 Karl Wilhelm) and the University of Michigan recital hall instrument (C. B. Fisk, 1985/modeled after Silbermann) were funded and built. These are just a few of the many pipe organs that are lasting legacies of Marilyn's work.

She inspired exceptional faculty to join her in the organ department. She invited Prof. Robert Glasgow to join her on the organ department faculty in 1962. Prof. Glasgow taught for 43 years and helped to establish the successful careers of countless organists. She invited Dr. James Kibbie to join the organ department in 1981. She also invited Dr. Michele Johns to teach church music courses for 33 years. This strong team of 4 exceptional organ department faculty attracted hundreds of students to study the pipe organ at Michigan.

Mason co- founded the annual Organ Conference at the University of Michigan in 1960. This conference is a lasting legacy which continues to inspire organists and those who love the music composed for this instrument. She was devoted to creating a multi-cultural conference which featured some of the greatest organists from around the globe.

She led over 50 tours to Europe and South America for organ students and professional musicians so that they could hear and play famous historic pipe organs.

To celebrate her 50 years of teaching, a book was published titled "The Organ Department at U of M: Reflections 1947 - 1997". Alumni of the organ department shared their tributes and fond memories of studying with Dr. Mason. Many noted that her legendary stories could immediately lighten moods and bring laughter to tense situations. And they were deeply grateful for her devotion to their success both as students and as professional musicians as they launched their careers.

Her legacy continues today. Scholarships in Dr. Mason's honor as well as in the honor of former faculty members Robert Glasgow and Michele Johns help the legacy continue for new students. The organ department, under the expert guidance of Dr. Kibbie as chair, is thriving.

## **DEEP GRATITUDE**

I will close where I began. Emma Lou Diemer, Marilyn Mason and Alice Parker are known for resilience, persistence and unflagging devotion. In a time when we feel the weight of uncertainty on our shoulders I think of what wisdom they would share with us. I can imagine a conversation with each one of them where they would share their deep- seated conviction that all will be well again. I believe that they would challenge us to be adaptors to change, willing to lead with conviction and courage. They would remind us that this challenging time can lead us to new possibilities, new ways of being human, new sacred texts to challenge our thinking, and new ways of sharing music with the world. Thank you Emma Lou, Alice and Marilyn for the countless ways you have enlightened us and inspire us in our own music making!