

Archer's focus is on the power of the organ

By Keith Powers, Contributing Writers

Posted at 3:01 AM

The most under-utilized instrument in all of music? It has to be the organ.

Massive organs sit in churches and in symphony halls across the world, and get fired up for religious services now and then, but hardly ever enjoyed on their own.

And more's the pity. The multi-faceted splendor and power that an organ possesses has thrilled composers and listeners for centuries. And Gail Archer is one of those musicians who tries to make sure we don't forget it.

Archer returns to St. Anthony of Padua's Roman Catholic Church this Sunday afternoon for a free recital on the church's Casavant Frères four-manual organ. She performs music of Joan Tower, Buxtehude, Schumann, Max Reger and Mary Howe.

It's Archer's second appearance in New Bedford — "I played my Russian album last year," she said on the phone from her home in New York.

She's a busy musician: one week after her New Bedford appearance, she's in Anchorage, Alaska; the next week she's in Igalada, Spain.

"I loved playing in New Bedford the first time," she said. "The people at St. Anthony are so kind. It's a lively parish, a mixed community and an interesting place. And everyone was so welcoming."

Archer performs a number of different programs on her tours, sometimes focused on one composer — she often plays the works of Olivier Messiaen — or works she has recorded, as she did last year with her collection of Russian music.

"This one is a mixed program," she said of the St. Anthony's recital. "I try to include women composers every chance I get. It's an important aspect of music that I want to draw attention to."

In addition to performing works of women composers, Archer has worked hard to rectify the shocking lack of women in music departments and cathedrals across North America. That work led to her founding a web site, www.musforum.org, dedicated to research and updates on women in academic and cathedral positions.

“When I initially did some research, I found there were zero women in major conservatories teaching organ,” she said. “Zero. And only two women serving at cathedrals. In all there are only 82 women teaching anywhere in the United States.

“It’s a hard field, very hard to find positions. There are no job searches when a position comes open — it all gets passed on, one friend to the next, always men. Too many outstanding women are overlooked.”

Archer herself has felt this prejudice in her career. “I’ve made it through persistence,” she said, “by working hard, by making CDs, and not being discouraged. By continually making phone calls and not giving up.”

Archer’s work with Joan Tower proves her point. In 2015 she collaborated with Tower on a work, “Power Dance.” Tower writes in the “Power Dance” score that Archer “helped me to understand so much more about the organ.”

“We tried out various sections of the piece,” Archer said. “She would describe the sound that she wanted, and I would come up with a sonic plan. We finally managed a solution to get what she specifically wanted.

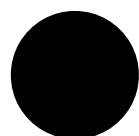
“But when the whole thing was finished, we both said ‘Since we worked on it together, shouldn’t I give the premiere?’ But a gentleman from France played it.”

Archer does play Tower’s “Ascent,” an earlier work, on the St. Anthony’s recital. “It starts with the lowest note in the organ,” she says, “and ends on the highest note. It’s technically challenging — she demands the best from us. On the whole, the tempo is fast, and gets faster. And then it ends on a whisper.”

Also on the program is “Elegy,” by Mary Howe, and Max Reger’s chorale fantasy on the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

“I’ll close with the Reger,” Archer said. “He takes that tune through every possible voice, in the pedals, in the left hand and in the right hand. It demands a fine ear, and I think it appeals to everyone because it’s a tune they all know.”

Organist Gail Archer performs works of Joan Tower, Buxtehude, Schumann, Max Reger and Mary Howe at St. Anthony of Padua Church, 1359 Acushnet Ave., New Bedford on Sunday, March 4 at 4:00 p.m. Admission is free. For information visit www.saintanthonynewbedford.com or call 508-993-1691.



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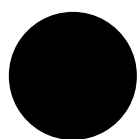
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