



Clara Gerdes PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

## On the Other Side of Locust Street

An organ scholar's experience at Saint Mark's Church

BY CLARA GERDES

I motioned the twenty singers in front of me to rise, breathed in the tempo, and cued the first notes of William Lloyd Webber's *Missa Maria Magdalena*. The keen focus of the choir, and the attention of the people in the pews behind me, made me feel responsibility like I'd never felt before. Later, recalling that moment made me reflect on my experiences playing the organ at Saint Mark's Church, Locust Street, and how they have shaped my abilities and aspirations as a musician.

"The church across the street from Curtis" is a local landmark with its bell tower, soup kitchen, and lush garden (which also makes it a popular spot for neighborhood dog walkers!). It's also a frequent venue for concerts and architecture tours. For Bryan Dunnewald and me, it's been even more: a generous community and a strong music program in the Episcopal tradition that has welcomed us as organ scholars since 2015, in a unique extension of our Curtis-based training.

Being an organ scholar is like being an apprentice; you work for an expert who provides guidance and feedback on the skills you are learning. For most organists, and certainly for me and Bryan, the skills of our trade will involve church playing and choir training.

Preparing, rehearsing, and performing music in a service is similar to working with any musical ensemble, but it also comes with a totally different pace and rhythm. Since the liturgy has many non-musical parts, for example, you often have to play before you feel quite ready, and deal with sudden logistical decisions (for example, is the five seconds between hymns

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too short to slide the organ bench into a more comfortable position?) On the other hand, it's wonderful to work with the same colleagues week after week and to experience the power the organ can unleash to lead a roomful of singers.

## A WIDE PALETTE

Every week, working under the direction of the church's organist and choirmaster, Robert McCormick, Bryan and I prepare and play different types of pieces: hymns sung by the congregation, the accompaniments for choral music, and organ solos. The choir sings a setting of the mass with its five movements (Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei) or the evensong canticles (Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis), in addition to one or two anthems (longer free pieces) for each service. Sometimes the music is taken from a larger work, such as Elgar's oratorio *The Apostles*; sometimes it's a Renaissance motet or mass setting; sometimes a work by a contemporary classical composer such as Nico Muhly, or even a Curtis graduate. Overall our church repertoire draws from a wide palette, ranging from the 15th century to the present.

A typical choral service at Saint Mark's is a feast for the eyes as well as the ears, with an intricate choreography of robed clergy and acolytes chanting, reading, kneeling, and processing around the church amid candles, bells, and incense. The liturgy, as all this symbolic drama is called, varies in mood and style throughout the year, from quiet and inward-looking in Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) to joyful and even boisterous at Easter. This affects the music that is programmed. All Souls' Day (November 2) calls for a full-scale Requiem mass, for which we have used the well-known settings by Mozart and Duruflé; at Easter we hire brass players; and Christmas has all the usual carols. But even a normal Sunday has its own sense of occasion.

## WEEKLY ROUTINE

Bryan and I are busiest on Sundays at 11 a.m. at the high mass, which features our twenty-voice parish choir of professionals and gifted amateurs singing complex music. But we also have to save some energy for the other services: a "family mass" each Sunday at 9 a.m. and choral evensong, held monthly on Sundays at 4 p.m.

At the family mass, the choir of boys and girls sings a different anthem nearly every week. These children and teenagers, ranging in age from seven to fifteen, learn quickly given the energy and focus of Robert's leadership, and sometimes Bryan and I rehearse them as well.

The monthly evensong brings both choirs together in a restorative service filled with references to rest, physical and mental, which brings the weekend to a calm close (although as the third service of the day, it can feel like the end of a marathon for the musicians!). Rehearsals are short, making it especially crucial for choir, choirmaster, and organists to work efficiently with one another in putting the music together.

From time to time Bryan and I are given the chance to take the lead—one of us may conduct a piece at mass or evensong, for example. One Sunday last fall, we even played and conducted a high mass in Robert's absence. Although being in the director's position, responsible for the whole ensemble, gave me some serious nerves at first, I was surprised how in control of things I felt. It made me realize how, in learning how to be good assistants, Bryan and I have started to gain many of the skills we need to be good leaders in our profession. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that our experience at Saint Mark's has been an ideal opportunity to "learn by doing" in the Curtis way! ♦

Organ student Clara Gerdes, who holds the Tureck Bach Research Institute Fellowship, entered Curtis in 2014 and studies with Alan Morrison.



A choral procession PHOTO: CHARLES GROVE

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Opposite: Curtis organ students Clara Gerdes and Bryan Dunnewald in rehearsal and in a service at Saint Mark's Church, where they serve as organ scholars under organist and choirmaster Robert McCormick (upper right). PHOTOS: CHARLES GROVE