Music to Our Ears

The Harper C. Maybee Music and Dance Library, located in the Dalton Center, Western Michigan University, is the recipient of a major library of organ music and related materials collected by distinguished organist and church musician Paul A. Humiston of Marshall, Michigan. The collection consists of a significant library of organ music along with books and periodicals that focus on the instrument and its musical history. Because of Mr. Humiston’s wide-ranging interest in all schools of organ composition and his personal desire to remain current with the literature in each area, the collection is unusually broad in scope, rich in detail, and reflects a lifetime of activity as a performer and teacher. Almost 1,600 solos and anthologies were acquired over a fifty-year period and they represent virtually all significant composers of organ music since the Baroque era. All of the master composers for organ—Bach, Franck, and Widor, among others—are found, and often by editions of most, if not all, of their works. There is extensive repertoire as well for many other prominent though less-known composers.

Paul Humiston’s career of five decades as a church musician is also demonstrated by scores for literally hundreds of pieces composed for liturgical use in various denominations. Of special note is the strong representation of American and British composers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Other special foci of this unique library of music are seen in the books of technical studies and methods for organ as well as in some 200 anthologies of piano music, and in a substantial number of scores of sacred choral works and other vocal music. Extensive holdings of The American Organist and The Diapason, for many years the two leading U.S. organ periodicals, complete the invaluable collection.

Nearly as impressive as the scope of the collection is the care with which it was organized and maintained. The music is grouped by individual composer under that individual’s name or, in the case of anthologies of different composers, by title. Items were inserted in folders, identified by composer, title, and publisher, and then stored flat in protective boxes designed for filing music. As a result, nearly all of the music is in good to excellent condition and can be used carefully without harming the original manuscripts.

Paul A. Humiston was born in Sandusky, Ohio, in 1905, and is a graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. His career began in Grand Rapids in 1929, where he was organist and director of music at the East Congregational Church. In 1937, he assumed a similar post at Trinity Episcopal Church in Marshall and served there until his retirement in 1971. And he and his wife Nettie (known to her friends as “Trix”) continue to maintain their home of 56 years in that well-known Michigan community. One of their sons, oboist Robert Humiston, is a Professor of Music at Western Michigan University.

In addition to his contributions as a church musician, Mr. Humiston was a teacher of organ, piano, and voice. From 1946 until 1957, he was accompanist for the Albion College Choral Society. His lifetime membership in the American Guild of Organists began in 1929 when he passed the Guild’s Associate examination while still a senior at Oberlin College. He has been a member of the Northern Ohio and Michigan (Detroit) chapters of the AGO, and was a founding member of the Western Michigan (Grand Rapids) and Southwest Michigan chapters. The Southwest Michigan chapter honored him with a lifetime membership in 1993.

Paul Humiston’s very special gift to Western Michigan University has not yet been fully analyzed and processed. Dr. Betty Pursley, Assistant Professor of Music and University Organist, who will serve as a consultant on repertoire and editions, and Music Librarian Greg Fitzgerald have just begun the massive task of uncovering the riches of the extensive collection. Although it may take several years to complete the work, some of the music will be appearing on the Music and Dance Library’s shelves within a few months. The more fragile items will be maintained in a separate location—undoubtedly stored in the original boxes—and used mainly for reference.

When offering his library as a gift to Western Michigan University, Paul Humiston said that, above all, he “wanted people to use it!” By donating it to the University Libraries, he has guaranteed that it will be available to organists and organ scholars who wish to use it—for performance, for research, for education. He has assured that the energy and dedication he brought to his profession will continue to inspire and educate present and future practitioners of his art. They, and we, are in his debt.

G.F.