

# ARTHUR POISTER

## 1898-1980

**A**RTHUR POISTER died quietly in the Duke University Hospital on February 25, 1980, at the age of eighty-one, and a wonderfully productive musical career ended. Organists in recent decades knew him as the Master Teacher of our time. We are likely to forget the performing career he built earlier.

Life began for him in Galion, Ohio, on July 13, 1898. In 1925 he received the B. Mus. from the American Conservatory in Chicago and passed the AAGO examinations in New York City. That same year he was music director of Central High School in Sioux City, Iowa, when Ernest Skinner came to town and heard him play one of his organs. Skinner urged that Poister make organ his profession and suggested he should study with Dupré. Skinner wrote Dupré and on July 4 Poister received a cable from Dupré advising him to come in the fall. He went to Paris two separate years, 1925-26 and 1927-28. Practicing eight to ten hours daily on a pedal piano, he learned with Dupré the complete Bach and Franck organ works, memorizing the Bach at the rate of two preludes and fugues a week.

On Dupré's recommendation he was appointed organist at the University of Redlands, California, where he taught from 1928 to 1937. It was a new department, a new Casavant organ and a new chapel. And Arthur Poister newly had under his belt the Bach organ works. In the four months beginning in November 1929 Poister presented the entire literature of Bach in a series of twenty memorized recitals and eleven lectures. It was a first for the United States and he managed it in two recitals and one lecture each week.

In 1931 he received the M. Mus. from the American Conservatory and in 1933-34 he again went to Europe to study, this time with Karl Straube in Leipzig. Straube by this time had seen the error of his earlier romantic way with baroque music and was a leader in the *Orgelbewegung*. Poister went to him to restudy the Bach he learned with Dupré, and did an equal amount of Reger.

He taught at the University of Minnesota 1937-38 and in 1938 was appointed to the faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory, where he stayed until 1948.

It was a momentous time both for the students at Oberlin and for Poister himself. There had already been a strong exposure to Straube's new ideas. At Oberlin he met Walter Holkamp Sr., and started to live with the sounds Holkamp was producing in Cleveland. It caused an about-face in Poister's performing style fully as significant as Straube's. His

reputation as a teacher was growing by leaps and bounds, he met Dorothy Broeland and married her, and the stage was set for the next phase of his career.

In 1948 he was appointed University Organist, Professor of Organ and Director of Music at Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University, and he stayed there until his retirement in August 1967. At first he was not interested in Syracuse, but after Chancellor William P. Tolley agreed to replace the organ equipment, Poister accepted the appointment. Soon a contract was signed with Holtkamp for four organs, two studio "Martini Models," the celebrated concert instrument in Crouse Auditorium (1950) and the slightly smaller three-manual in Hendricks Chapel (1952). Poister had matured as a teacher and the equipment was unequalled. Students flocked to Syracuse from all over the country and the University saw a golden age of the organ.

Honors came his way in the form of a D. Mus. degree from Morningside College in Sioux City and a Chancellor's medal from Syracuse University. The retirement years brought a welcome series of appointments at the University of Colorado, Hollins College, Oberlin Conservatory, Longwood College in Virginia and finally at Meredith College in Raleigh, N. C., where he lived the last five years. And always there were the workshops and classes he was able to teach into his eighty-first year until emphysema kept him home.

"When AP takes hold of music, sparks fly!" (His students always referred to him as AP.) So said Norman Meservey to me some years ago, and it was certainly true. The effect he had on individuals and groups making music was very special indeed. He had special gifts as a musician and equally special gifts dealing with people. One faculty colleague at Syracuse said of him, "He's a saint!" My fiber agreed and added, "with an impish streak!" Anyone who has experienced his special brand of participatory master class has seen that marvelous interaction with the student performer and the rare ability to involve the auditors at the same time. Many will remember how a simple B-flat arpeggio played anytime for the Hendricks Chapel Choir brought an instant burst of Haydn's "Achieved is the glorious work" and how the hymn singing raised both the roof and the hair on your head.

One colleague wrote in a birthday song, "If there's talent there, he'll find it, and if there's not, he'll make you play like you've got it." AP often said he was the world's worst teacher and he agonized a lot over

his students, but he also knew his strengths, even if he did not talk about them. His teaching seemed totally free of theories or conscious performance practice. The approach to a piece was always a musical one, understanding and dealing creatively with the music at hand, and the repertoire was very wide. Only rarely did he make a direct technical attack on a problem. He sang and conducted a lot and urged the students to sing. It was not unusual to hear his voice above full organ when you approached the building in open-window weather. The rhythm was always strong, consistent and supple at the same time. He had an absolute sense of tempo, and an uncanny memory for detail—remembering how a student played a passage last week as easily as he quoted references from memory by page, line and measure in the Peters Bach edition.

He would also spin outrageous stories and pass them off for fact, make up statistics, or pretend to curse by rapidly quoting a string of German chorale titles in an appropriate tone of voice. Through it all wove a support for the student that everyone sensed, perhaps unconsciously, and an amazing ability to allow each student to develop his own musical personality.

And then there were the AP signals: the sniff that indicated an important pickup or rest; the strong arm movements as he conducted a player; the pacing and striding the stage behind the player's back as he empathized with the rhythmic life of the piece; the quick double-scratch in the middle of his back that said, "We'll come back to that spot in a moment." There were code words and expressions: "Play it with stug" (guts backwards); "Make it spiccy" (bright, short staccato); "Feel it in circles" (the F-major Toccata!); the slap or poke on the back as he said, "Why don't you *like* this piece?" just when he knew you were having the time of your life!

Some of us were doubly fortunate to work with him first as students and then as colleagues. His concern for a young colleague was equally strong, supportive and encouraging—seeing that the young teacher had some talented students, endorsing ideas in a seminar and setting up situations in which the fledgling's independence could develop.

He was a man whose life touched so many organists in this country that it is almost easier to number those who did not study with him than those who did. His years at Oberlin and Syracuse brought him some of this country's strongest talent. The years of workshops brought contact with hundreds of others, and thousands passed through the choir and congregations that packed Hendricks Chapel. His spirit among us remains pervasive and vital. His immortality consists in the legacy passed along by his student children and grandchildren. Each of us will remember our experience with him gratefully and lovingly.

WILL HEADLEE

Will Headlee is University Organist, Professor of Organ and Chairman of the Division of Keyboard, Guitar and Harp at Syracuse University. His undergraduate work was with Jan Schinhan at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Graduate study was with Arthur Poister at Syracuse. He joined the Syracuse faculty in 1956.