

## **A Letter From the Dean**

Dear AGO Members,

Apologies for the lack of news/newsletters the last couple of months. I was hoping we could organize an in-person meeting inside at a local church in April, which seemed distinctly possible, right until our Michigan COVID numbers started skyrocketing. Alas! We'll hope to have that Kollen Park bring-your-own picnic and chair get-together on Sunday, June 6 around 3pm – details to come later.

If you didn't have a chance to tune in to Elizabeth West's masterclass for the GR AGO, or Steve and my Holland AGO online workshop, both are still online and available to watch.

Elizabeth's - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sLFouulxMw>

Steve & Rhonda's - <https://fb.watch/54k8ZKjb8P/>

So, since there's not much to report event-wise, I thought I'd take this opportunity to share with you a couple pieces I wrote recently on composer Margaret Sandresky – born 100 years ago on April 28, and still alive and well! I played a livestream from Calvin University chapel in April celebrating her music, and it is available to watch now, if you're not familiar with her works.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQjRqp9el-s>

Since quite a few of the pieces I played on that program are larger works, I wrote these two essays for the Grand Rapids AGO newsletter, explaining who she is, and discussing various of her shorter works that I enjoy and play, which might be of use for service playing, and are not overly difficult.

Margaret Sandresky will turn 100 years old in April 2021. Sandresky has been commissioned to contribute pieces for multiple AGO National and Regional conventions over many decades. She studied composition at Salem College, Eastman School of Music, and under a Fulbright scholarship in Germany. She taught composition at Oberlin, University of Texas-Austin, headed the organ department at Salem College, and founded the organ department at the North Carolina School for the Arts. After retiring in 1986, she has concentrated more on composing, and is still going strong, with the latest volume of her organ works set to be published in 2021! She was awarded the AGO Distinguished Composer Award in 2004. Her compositions range from larger cycles, based on sacred and secular themes, to variation sets, and many hymn settings, practical and useful for weekly Sunday preludes and postludes. She has a uniquely American style that is at once accessible and innovative. I've performed her works around the US and in Germany, and never fail to hear appreciative comments from both organists and non-musicians alike.

We are looking first at Volume 10 of Sandresky's complete works (all volumes are published by Wayne Leupold.) This volume contains three very nice variation sets, as well as lovely shorter hymn settings. Two of the variation sets are based on hymn tunes – Brother James Air (Psalm 23), and National Hymn (God of our Fathers) - and one is on an original tune. I find these variation sets to be very practical and useful. The registrations are all quite creative, and make use of many colors of an instrument. They would work well on small or large instruments of any style. And again, all are appropriate for either church or concert settings, and very effective with audiences.

The *Brother James Air* set is probably easiest of the three – with a theme and five variations, each one or two pages long. *God of Our Fathers* is a bit flashier, with some interesting compositional techniques – two variations include canons, there is a “Grand jeux”, and a final toccata. But of those six variations, none is longer than two pages, and many are quite approachable from the performer’s standpoint. A beautiful Pastorale and Prayer could work for an offertory, with variations 1, 2 & 4 for a prelude, and ending either with the Toccata, or the Plen jeux.

My concert at Calvin includes the *Variations on an Original Theme* (dedicated to American composer Carson Cooman – he just told me it was written by her for his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, and includes a tiny musical reference to the tune Happy Birthday!) This set opens with a statement of the theme – a beautiful melody line that sounds almost Celtic in spirit. The first variation is lush, featuring two different 4’ flutes on the melody vs. strings and celestes. The second, marked “Adagio: freely, a romance”, sounds to me like a schmoozy jazz improvisation, using a nasard if you have it for the melody. Variation three contrasts three 8’ sounds – flute in the pedal, vs. flute 8’ and reed 8’ for each hand – an easy trio texture. Variation four has the melody in the pedal on a 4’ flute stop, against an accompaniment of flute, string, and celeste chords. The sixth and final variation opens with a chordal section, then segues into a quirky, dance-like section in a mixed meter before moving into an exciting finale.

I’ve been posting recordings of her works on my YouTube page, where you can go to listen. So far, the final two movements of *Five Sacred Dances* is posted from a concert in 2018, as well as a short chorale prelude, titled *Her Children Rise Up and Call Her Blessed*, that I recorded this spring at my church. This could be lovely for Mother’s Day Sunday at church...

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaEh5dtzyXWGO9hmbzHG32g>

Also, you can find the live recording of a concert I played last fall in Cincinnati, where I performed the *L’homme armé Organ Mass*, which will be included on both concerts as well. The piece begins at the 9 minute mark (or start watching at 7:10 to hear my spoken program notes on this piece before the performance)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTgQVpDQJww&t=3087s>

Now let’s look at volume 4 of her complete works, which is full of hymn settings and shorter works. From this volume, I have played the *Meditation on Amazing Grace* very often, on concerts and for church. I have found that a new and unusual setting of a very familiar hymn like this really gets audiences’ attention. This setting is full of unexpected harmonies and chord changes, and I hear comments often from listeners who have enjoyed this piece. This was included on the Calvin concert.

*Six Variations on a Ground Bass* is the one piece from this volume that is not hymn based. This piece was originally written for a very small, historic instrument, and while modified since then for this version, is still very practical for a smaller organ with limited resources. It is not technically difficult, but each variation calls for distinctive colors, with its own charming character. This worked very well on a recital I played on a one manual, tracker organ with limited pedal, though could be played on larger instruments as well.

*A Wreath of Carols* is a collage of various Christmas hymn settings, pulled together in an attractive larger piece. This was lovely on an Advent recital at Mayflower (it can end very big and dramatically), but could also be very practical if you need to prepare a longer Christmas Eve prelude, and you wouldn’t need to end it fortissimo.

*Ein Feste Burg* is a short setting of the hymn A Mighty Fortress, written in a Baroque style, complete with counterpoint – it almost sounds like Buxtehude, but with a bit more adventurous harmonies. This might be perfect for Reformation, if you're tired of always pulling out the Pachelbel! You can also find this on the Calvin livestream.

So, that gives you some ideas of shorter, hymn-based works that might be of interest to you and your congregation. Michael Barone also has a Margaret Sandresky-themed Pipedreams happening this month - <https://www.pipedreams.org/episode/2021/04/26/still-composing>

Did you know, you can listen to any Pipedreams episode on their website, any time of the day or night? This is an invaluable resource – don't forget to take advantage of it!

Thanks for reading, keep practicing, and enjoy those Tulips!

Rhonda

### **Upcoming Events -**

Sunday, June 6, 3pm, Kollen Park – Members social gatherings (in person!)  
Bring your own lawn chair, drink, and snacks  
(dependent on weather – watch for details)

### **Chapter Officers for 2020-2021**

Dean - Rhonda Edgington  
Sub-Dean - Linda Fulton  
Secretary - Karen Howells  
Treasurer - Gordon Bruns  
Board Member - Rick Van Oss  
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