

J.J. Keeler History



Photo taken 1968
By Dr. Glenn Williams

Brigham Young University School of Music
Professor of Organ 1935-1996 (61 years)
Interview with Virginia Keeler
June 2, 2008 (95 years of age)

June 2, 2008
with Mike Ohman



Virginia Bowles Keeler

Education: Graduated from Brigham Young High School 1931
Certificate from Karl Straube, Leipzig, Germany 1933
Brigham Young University, B.M. abt 1935
Brigham Young University, M.M. abt 1950

Early Brigham Young University Music Faculty:

Dr. Franklin Madsen, with his wide experience as a conductor in the United States and Europe and with his extensive educational background, has created within the Music Department of the Brigham Young University a noted degree of excellence in choral music. Dr. Madsen has also been teaching at the Chicago College of Music during the summer months, and has toured Europe as a musician on three different occasions.

The combined choruses of the men and women's glee clubs, as well as other students interested in vocal music, are known as the Concert Chorus. This group, directed by Dr. Franklin Madsen and Dr. Florence Jepperson Madsen, has been praised highly for their appreciation of choral singing and the refined quality they display in singing classical and church music.

The chorus, accompanied by the University's Symphony Orchestra, and the organ artistry of Professor J. J. Keeler, presented to an equally enthusiastic audience the famed Handel's "Messiah."

Dr. Florence Jepperson Madsen shares with her husband the commendation and praise for their accomplishments in vocal music, and is tireless in her efforts to further good music at the University. Dr. Madsen holds two doctoral degrees -- one in music and an honorary degree in musical education.

The BYU Band, directed by Dr. John R. Halliday, a talented and exuberant personality, earned a reputation of precision and musicality under the watchful care of this energetic conductor.

The Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Professor Lawrence Sardoni has performed the great symphonic literature, and several compositions of Dr. LeRoy J. Robertson. Crawford Gates, composer-pianist, has been featured as a student soloist with the orchestra. Professor Sardoni steps into Dr. Robertson's post.

LeRoy Robertson, one of the world's foremost contemporary composers, winner of the \$25,000 Reichold Symphonic Award for his "Trilogy", left BYU in 1949 after 25 years.

People with whom J.J. Keeler studied:

Karl Straube
Gordon Bullock
Robert Brownley

Siegfried Karg-elert
Garrett deJong
Karl Fleischer

Flor Peters
LeRoy Robertson
Thalben-ball

Visiting Organists at BYU:

Marcel Dupre'

Flor Peters

Alexander Schreiner

Fernando Germani

Andre' Marchal

Catherine Crozier

Robert Munns

Xavier Darasse

Notable compositions:

Organ Method; by JJ Keeler and Donnell Blackham

Men Are That They Might Have Joy; by JJ Keeler, text by J. Marinus Jensen p 275 LDS Hymnal

Joseph and Brigham; music by JJ Keeler, Text by J. Marinus Jensen

Passacaglia; by JJ Keeler

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent; by JJ Keeler

Hobbies, other activities:

J loved to explore old ghost towns and mines. Often he would spend the summers wandering mine ruins. Occasionally, he found an artifact of interest and would take it home. Included among his treasures is a railroad track he meticulously uprooted from its mountings, carefully tied it to the under frame under his car, and drove it home.

He also loved the desert in bloom. Yearly, he would take a few days away from teaching to witness the rare and brief beauty of the Utah/Nevada desert flowers in full blossom.



Organ Student List:

Jack Ware, Sarah Grow, Virginia Johnson, Eliza Beus, NaDene Ray, Verena Hatch, Rosella Compton, Melvin Randall, Robert Douglas, Chester Stone, Gordon Greniger, Paul Christensen, Jack Isaac, Troy Newville, Doreen Kerr, Bethany Dredge, Rachel Farmer, Parley Belnap, Ruth Barrus, Donnell Blackham, Larry Anderson, Weldon Whipple, Walter Whipple, Gerald Dick, Donna Nelson Wright, Bryce O'Dell, Preston Larson, Doug Bush, Don Cook, Joan Stevens, Clay Christiansen, Mike Ohman, Bonnie Goodliffe, Lynda Margettes, Rulon Christiansen, Kim Croft, Jim Wallman, Claire Hendricks, Mark Bell, Jim Rasmussen, Pauline Atkins, David Ralphs, Julie Farmer, Ken Noble, Vivian Forsythe, Scott Mills, David Pickering.

Interview with Virginia Keeler and Mike Ohman, former student of JJ Keeler.

Mike: Where did JJ go for undergraduate and graduate school?

Virginia: Upon graduation from BY High, JJ went to Europe with LeRoy Robertson when he was 18. JJ stayed in Germany and did all his work there, before coming back to Provo and attending BYU for both undergraduate and graduate school.

Who were some of his professors when he was at BYU?

While attending BY High, LeRoy Robertson took JJ under his wing, thought he saw potential.

Who else made contributions to the organ area during that time?

There was no organ program at BYU at that time. When JJ got home from Europe he wanted to get married to me, but we realized that required money and a job. All he wanted to do was play the organ. Therefore, he talked about it with President Harris. His grandfather bought the organ from the Provo Paramount Theater (it was a 3 manual 8 rank Robert Morton Theatre Organ complete with percussion and traps). His first job was to play for the assemblies, act as an accompanist, and teach the older students. He was the beginning of the organ department at BYU.

What were the facilities like in College Hall?

I remember that his office was on the right-hand side of the east entrance, and that the lunch room was above the arts building on the lower campus. In his office was his own Baldwin Model 10 organ which he used for teaching and practice.

Who were the other faculty?

Margaret Summerhays, the Madsens, LeRoy Robertson, and others I don't remember. There was always summer faculty (professional people from around the world) who came in. Professor Robert Sauer, who wrote "Springtime in the Rockies" even tried to recruit me to come play in his band at one point. There was always a good band and orchestra at BYU.

How long did JJ teach on lower campus?

He taught there until they moved him up to this (HFAC) building in 1964.

When did JJ begin his employment?

JJ began his employment with BYU when he came home from Europe around 1935.

Can you describe the curriculum JJ taught?

He taught organ lessons and organ majors; improvisation, church music history, keyboard harmony, theory, first year harmony, composition, organ registration and organ problems.

Who else did he bring in once the organ program began to grow?

Bill Foxley, Parley Belnap, Bob Cundick, John Longhurst, Bob Manookin, and others.

Do you recall any of the pieces he wrote?

There was one I can't remember the name of; however, it was a Passacaglia. Also, there was the song that his grandfather wrote the lyrics for -- *Men Are That They Might Have Joy*.

Who are some students that have since done well whom JJ influenced?

Many of the Salt Lake Tabernacle organists -- Clay Christiansen specifically. He taught Clay how to live and manage and was a father-figure to him, Bonnie Goodliff, Doug Bush, Don Cook, Parley Belnap, Joan Stevens, Donnell Blackham, Dorine Kerr.

Tell me about JJ's organ method book?

He did it as his master's thesis. It was all in his head; he just had to put it all down and organized it.

Who was he studying with at that point?

He received his master's degree much later however, and a good story is that he taught up until he died at age 86. He taught until Friday and passed away on Sunday.

Did JJ give any public speeches while he was here?

I don't remember any, but he did play a lot for assemblies and other events while he was there.

When did he retire?

He hated that word, the idea of being put on the shelf. He kept teaching even after he was retired. He just wanted things to be better for the School of Music.

What sorts of big events did JJ play at or help to organize?

He played and helped to organize big ones for BYU such as Messiah presentations (I flipped pages for him) at the Tabernacle. They didn't use every piece in the Messiah, so JJ would paper-clip pages together. At one performance two of the paperclips got stuck together. When I turned the pages, I turned too many and J played a different piece than the choir was prepared to sing. I got fired!

There was one recital in particular I remember where something went wrong with one of the pipes so he turned the organ off, fixed it, and came back out and finished.

Who were some of the traveling artists that he brought in?

Every summer they brought people in from around the world; Marcello, Dupre' and others.

Tell me about JJ's experience with Albert Schweitzer?

That was a very special thing in his life. JJ honored that man as a humanitarian and as a good organist. He contributed to his work to the Humanitarian Hospital in Africa, by helping to raise money to subsidize the healthcare. Sadly at a later date, JJ regretted losing a thank you letter from Schweitzer for his help -- when he moved offices.

What happened to Professor Forsner?

He was a piano teacher here in the summer. His concerts were in the JSB here on campus, and we always had pie and watermelon at parties. You got to know everyone who came and treated them as friends.

When the summer programs faded out, who was the President of the university?

President McDonald started them and Ernest Wilkinson finished them.

Virginia, you were always very supportive of JJ, those are great memories for me. Students didn't just take lessons from JJ they were a part of him or he became a part of them. He was an interesting teacher, and he was always musical.

He always said, "Never get too good to practice those piano scales."

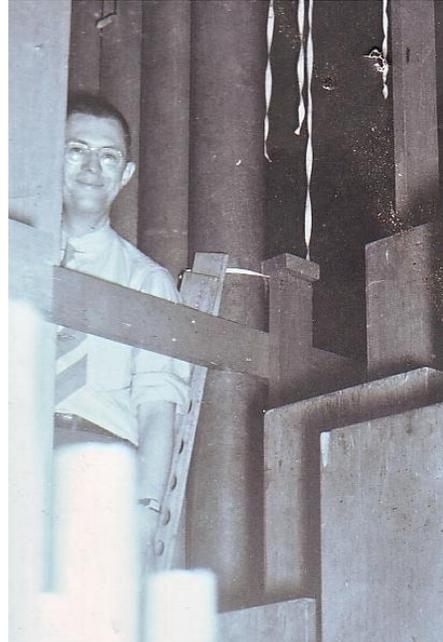
One of JJ's students has mentioned to me that he had to try out to study with him.

You (Mike Ohman) have been wonderful for our family - you've kept both JJ and Brent going. It's the friendships that have sustained us through the years.

There has been lots of wonderful and even famous organists who have come out of here because of JJ. Do you remember any?

The people he has influenced have become dear friends. I hear from them at Christmas. Bob Douglas in St. George even dedicated an organ piece to him.

In 1948 the Austin pipe organ installed in the Salt Lake Tabernacle was removed and a new Aeolian Skinner Pipe Organ was designed and installed by G. Donald Harrison. The old four manual 110 rank Austin was reduced to a four manual 75 rank instrument and installed by the Schoenstein Organ Company of San Francisco, California, in the Joseph Smith Auditorium. It was completed in 1950. It became the catalyst for many organ events on campus. The other major instrument used by the school was the Provo Tabernacle which had a 3 manual 49 rank organ rebuilt by Wayne Carroll. It had Austin chests.



Three practice organs were installed in the basement of the JSB. A 2 manual 7 rank Schoenstein, and a 2 manual 3 rank Moller Artiste. The Moller was delivered with two other exact instruments. One went to the Christian Science Church on First East and First North, and the other to Berg Mortuary on First East and Center Street in Provo. The other practice organ in the basement of the JSB was a Baldwin electronic organ.

When the new Fine Arts Center was built in 1964, Professor Keeler was instrumental in the design of the organ department. In his studio was installed a 3 manual 12 rank Wicks organ. In the studio next door was a 2 manual 9 rank instrument used by Bill Foxley. There were four Wicks practice organs, a 2 manual 3 rank, a 2 manual 4 rank, a 2 manual 5 rank, and a 2 manual 6 rank. Each had a different specification from the other so that a variety of colors could be experienced. The Moller and Schoenstein organs were moved from the JSB to the basement of HFAC and a Hammond Organ was added to the cadre of practice instruments.

In 1970, J had a major concert organ installed in the Madsen Recital Hall. It was built by the Walcker Organ Company of Germany in a Neo-baroque style -- 3 manuals and 45 ranks. The organ was spread across a shelf that was suspended 20' above, and extended the entire width of the stage. The Swell division was placed in the center with the Positiv to its right and the Great to its left. The Pedal division was divided among the other divisions. The console was rather modern in design and did not endure the heavy use well. Within a few years, the console was replaced by a sturdy Austin console originally installed in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square.

Students also had access to the magnificent organs on Temple Square and other fine venues in the Salt Lake area, all because of the influence of JJ Keeler.

Special thanks to Brent Keeler, son of JJ and Virginia for artifacts, pictures, and detail. He has been most helpful in the acquisition of facts and materials.

JJ Keeler Journal 1932

I left Provo, Utah, June 17, 1932, for New York City, enroute to Europe, to study organ. We, (Professor LeRoy Robertson and myself) made the trip from Provo to New York by bus. I rather hated to leave home, but when we got to Salt Lake City the feeling left.

The ride from Provo to Omaha, Neb. was very tiresome, but the scenery was beautiful. The farms in Nebraska were very beautiful, also in Iowa. We were two and ½ days and three nights going as far as Chicago. We arrived in Chicago the morning of June 20, at 7:00 am. We immediately went out to a hotel across from the Union Bus Depot. It was the Hotel Roosevelt. We signed up for a room. When the porter put down our suitcases in the room, he told us that if we should take a notion that we wanted to see some girls, to let him know and he would send some around. We however had no desire to see any at that time.

We each took a hot bath, changed our clothes and lay down on the bed and went to sleep. When we awoke, we were very much refreshed after our long journey to Chicago. We had dinner and went up town to look around. We went, thou afternoon, out to the University of Chicago, to attend an organ recital, but there was none on that day, because the university had just closed for the winter semester, and was preparing for the summer session.

The day being Sunday, we went out after to the University Branch of the Church, the place I used to practice the organ, when I studied in Chicago with Charles Demorest. There (in the church) we saw Agnes Kilpack, Madsen's old flame, and Gilman Snell. We were invited to stay to the service, but being too tired, we decided to go back to the hotel.

The next day we slept late and then went up to Kimball Hall where I did an hour's organ practice and Prof. Robertson rented a piano to do some work on his composition.

After practice as we were going down the hall, we met Frank Church, an organist acquaintance from the summer of 1931. He was just going in Kimball Concert Hall to practice the organ for his organ recital for graduation. He was very pleasant and invited us in to hear him.

That night at 12:00 we again boarded a bus bound for New York. The ride from Chicago to New York was wonderful.

We arrived in New York at 2:00 a.m. June 23. We immediately went into another part of the bus station in New York, and there we found the lobby to the Knights of Columbus Hotel. We rented a room with bath, and went to bed. We awoke at 8:00 a.m. and each took a bath. We then went out and had breakfast; rode a subway to the American Exp. Co. Office for our passports.

In the afternoon we went to the Roxy Theater. The show was terrible; the orchestra still worse, and the vaudeville acts rotten and vulgar. Money wasted.

That evening we took a taxi to the ship docks and boarded our ship at about 9:00 p.m. We were put in a 4 berth room, No. 362 – SS Hamburg – Tourist Class. Our roommates were Mr. Egan Pesson, a fat educated little German who had been in America ten years and Otto Egner, a butcher, who was a German by descent. Mr. Egner and his lady friend were going to spend the summer in the Rhine section of Germany. Our steward was Mr. Lerchstein, a fine little German fellow.

We enjoyed ourselves very much. Mr. Pesson was a very witty fellow, just like Professor Sauer in actions. He was originally from Berlin; he lives in the U.S. in a little town near Pittsburg. Mr. Egner spoke regular New Yorker language – “foist” – “boid”- etc. Mr. Egner snored every night on the voyage across.

As we pulled out from New York, I had a very peculiar feeling, especially as we passed the Statue of Liberty.

On the voyage, I was seasick 4 days, and was in bed two. When this passed, the rest of the voyage was very enjoyable. We had fog two or three nights, and it gave me a funny feeling to be in the berth and hear that old fog-horn toot.

On board the ship traveling tourist class, were some scholarship piano students of Joseph Levine, bound for a little place out of Salzburg. Mr. Levine was in 1st class on the ship, he came down to 2nd class several times to various socials so I got to have a good look at him. Dr. Wm C. Carl was also on board. I also had a good look at him. Dr. Carl is Director of the Guilman's Organ School in New York.

As we were nearing France, we saw two real old sailing ships bound for Ireland. They certainly were beautiful.

June 30, early in the morning, we docked at Cherbourg, France, where Professor Robertson disembarked for Paris and then to Lugano, Switzerland. As the small boat pulled away from the ship with Professor Robertson on, I certainly was homesick. I really felt alone in the world. Robertson certainly was a fine companion.

We pulled up anchor and crossed the English Channel. At noon we stopped at Southampton, England. We left there and went up into the North Sea, and for a long time, were out of sight of land.

Mr. Pesson kept me good company for the rest of the journey. I must not forget the Lutheran Pastor on board the ship. He was very friendly with me and I certainly appreciated it.

On the morning of July 1, Germany formed into sight. It certainly looked good to these eyes. We landed at 1:00 p.m. at Auxhaven. We took a train from Auxhaven to Hamburg.

When I arrived in Hamburg the Elder that was supposed to meet me was not there, but a kindly porter that could speak about 10 words of English took me in charge. I sent a telegram to Grant Larsen in Bremer, telling him what train to meet. I spent 2 hours in the

Hamburg, Bannhof. Then the porter put me on the next “dating” to Bremen. I arrived there at 7:00 p.m. in the evening of July 1. Grant was at the train to meet me. After the usual embraces we went to his “wohnung”.

When we arrived at the “wohnung”, I found that Grant was fixed up very nice.

Grant was District President of the Bremen District, and the elders working under him in Bremen were Eli B. Rogers Jr. from Bountiful, Utah and Rudolph Schwemmer, from Neurenburg, Germany, a cousin of Alexander Schreiner. After the usual greetings we retired for the night. I slept with Grant in a bed with a feather mattress for a cover. I had a good nights rest and felt much refreshed the next morning.

JJ Keeler had a deep respect for Albert Schweitzer and communicated with him on a variety of subjects. Questions were once asked of J, the answers to which he thoughtfully recorded in his own hand.

How did Albert Schweitzer play? Different than was expected of him by the times, different from the great organists of the famous concert halls—the virtuosos—, different from contemporary music heard on new German factory-made organs. His organ playing exemplifies simplicity. This simplicity became his secret. To this is added naturalness, which allows the composition to be played in an unforced manner. “He wanted merely to express, but with a greater liveliness and forcefulness, what was contained in the composition itself. Through this he became an innovator in present-day organ methods.” In any case, he broke away from the German art of registration of his day in order that a musical composition might be played (represented) in the most effective manner. This method also advocated the possibility of numerous, quick registrational changes during performance.

Schweitzer always proceeds from a foundational registration, the basis of which is the actual musical composition. Manual changes and changes of color occur only when a climax within the composition or the beginning of a musical sentence makes these seem legitimate. An obvious phrasing serves him in working out linear direction. He proceeds from the assumption that Bach thought of the string (stringed instruments) phrasing in the first line of all instrumental composition. This grew out of the short method of bowing in a natural manner. As an analogy to this, he desires to transfer this phrasing to the organ. Consequently, phrasing becomes clear and consistent on the manuals and in the pedals, for the listener easily intelligible, for the performer the foundation of plasticity in the composition and of the resultant phrasing. He renounces all emotional demonstrations in performance, and seeks neither to deceive nor to startle the listener with dynamic or registrational changes. As a result, his presentation is grand and noble; in the last sense, very suitable to the organ, and workable. He has often been accused of playing too slowly, with too little virtuosity. Such opinions could only arise from those who have searched little or not at all into the proper relationship between the organ and the organist, and from those who do not know the method of performance of the old Baroque organ and the assumptions it implies. “With an increase in the quality of the performance, the tempo may be proportionately decreased because the listener receives the impression of rapid movement with moderate tempos when every detail is impressively conveyed. Even then he can hardly

grasp the rich polyphony.” Alice Ehlers has described his playing especially well. “Schweitzer is a servant of the composition, a true servant, under whose hands nothing is lost. He causes us to perceive and to comprehend—in this manner he convinces us.”

Another Keeler writing:

Schweitzer gave everything when he performed. The churches and concert halls where he played were always full of those who came to experience Bach and other great German and French masters. They began to acknowledge that Schweitzer was destined to become an “apostle,” so to speak. His playing was always, however, an example for conversion to the “spiritual power of humanitarian thought” and a western event (occurrence).

On one occasion, this friend of humanity performed the Voigt-Organ Works of Bach and Cesar Frank in the Smetanasaale at Prague, and a (female) singer rendered songs of Anton Dvorak and Frank. People from German and Czechoslovakian areas experienced at this time the spirit of an organ designed at the climax of the Reformation, and became witnesses for an acknowledgement of the idea laid down here, that of proclaiming Bach and other great masters. A long silence and then loud applause rose to an apotheosis for the performer, who finally stood before a small number of loyal supporters. Everyone felt the spirit of this great man and the solemn (sacred) awe (thrill) of the hour. From here, silent threads of that Augustian proclamation—that this country had become a place for humanism and Caritas since the days of Josephinian rationalism—stretched forth.

Schweitzer, Albert

Born at Kayserberg, Upper Alace, January 4, 1875. He is a noted philosopher and theologian of high distinction, medical doctor (founder and director of a medical hospital in Equatorial Africa), an ardent advocate and originator of the “Reverence for Life” philosophy, an organist and one of the leading authorities on Bach. He was distinguished in the above areas and widely known for his interest in preserving old organs because of their superior tone qualities for the performance of the organ works of Bach and other composers.

In 1909 Schweitzer participated in the organ section of the International Musical Society held in Vienna. As a result of this, Schweitzer and several other scholars worked out a set of “International Regulations for Organ Building.” These regulations had much influence at the time and led to many changes in organ building. Schweitzer also became interested in the organs of the Bach period and as a result he felt that the tone qualities of the older organs superior to those of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is generally credited with being one of the founders of the “Orgelbegung” (New Organ Movement) about 1900. The aim of the “Orgelbergung” was to revive the techniques of the 18th and 19th century organ builders that are necessary for the authentic interpretation of polyphonic music.

Dr. Schweitzer advocated tracker action, light mixtures and much individuality of tonal ensemble in the manual division. He also felt that the tone of Andreus Silberman was finer than more modern voicing.

According to Dr. Schweitzer, “The action of an organ and the quality of its tone defines a fine organ as determined by these factors, the pipes, the wind chest, the wind pressure and the position it occupied in the building.”