

Richard Hills Concert Review

by Mark Dresden

Editor's note: This review appears in *The Vox Humana* newsletter, Winter 2008. It is a review of Richard Hills' appearance on the Dickinson Kimball, November 17, 2007, and reflects the reviewer's impressions and opinions.

It's hard to believe that Richard Hills was just one week short of his 27th birthday on the evening of our concert. All of the music he performed was written before he was born. And yet, his interpretations were sensitive and appropriate for the music and the period in which it was written.

Through the years we have been fortunate to have many good organist/performers and a select few who were truly outstanding. Richard Hills certainly belongs in that select group of top tier performers. His program was interesting, well paced and well suited to the Dickinson Organ and the Dickinson audience. He offered 34 different pieces of music, some being organized into medleys, all played beautifully and from memory. Most of the pieces were written in the 20s, 30s and 40s and included music written for the movies, the musical theater, for opera, for Dixieland jazz as well as orchestral pieces representing the British Light Music genre.

The opening, console up, number was a rousing rendition of Cole Porter's "From This Moment On." It was followed by "Serenade In Blue" written in 1942 by Mack Gordon and Harry Warren for the movie "Orchestra Wives" starring Glen Miller and the Glen Miller Orchestra. Next on the program was a medley of 6 tunes from the 1948 Cole Porter Musical "Kiss Me Kate." Prophetic among these tunes was "It's Too Darn Hot" which very accurately described the temperature in the auditorium – about 95 degrees. By the second half of the concert however, with fans and doors open, the auditorium was comfortable. Our thanks to DTOS volunteer Steve Green for making this happen.

From Broadway the program next transported us across the Pond for some British Light Music, perhaps not unexpected with Richard as our organist. First, "At the Dance" from the 1919 Suite "Summer Days" written by Eric Coates (known as the father of British Light Music.) Next an earlier piece "Satyr Dance" written by Sir Edward German. Both of these pieces were orchestral transcriptions and musically a tad, perhaps two tads, more complex than the movie/theater ballads. They provided a nice contrast, and a nice opportunity to highlight some of the wonderful orchestral sounds the Dickinson Organ has to offer as well as highlighting Richard's substantial technical skills.

We then return to the USA with a medley of 7 songs written between 1925 and 1948 by Irving Berlin for the movies. These were followed by a hauntingly beautiful rendition of "Body and Soul" written in 1930 by Edward Heyman, Robert Sour, Frank Eyton and composer Johnny Green..

The first half of the program ended with a rip roaring arrangement of "Tiger Rag." This arrangement is featured in Richard's album "Graduation." And it is impressive -- dazzling footwork, intricate fingering with cascading glissando counter melodies. "Tiger Rag," which has been a jazz standard since 1917 is frequently used in film sound tracts

whenever something *energetic* is called for; and energetic it was. Also energetic was the thunderous applause which followed.

Richard opened the second half of his program with the up tempo "The Dam Busters March," written by Eric Coates and used in the 1954 British patriotic Film "Dam Busters." This was followed by "A Nightingale Sang in Berkely Square," a song written in 1940 by the British song writer and band leader Ray Noble. The most famous recording was made by Vera Lynn and Richard's arrangement conjured up images of this recording. More Ray Noble songs followed in the form of a four song medley starting with the peppy, up tempo "Cherokee" -- great song and great arrangement.

Next on the program a fascinating little piece called "Jaywalk" written in 1927 by Zez Confreys. Why fascinating? Because, for me at least, the arrangement actually conjured up the vision of a silent film. As Richard played you could just see the Little Tramp wandering down the street, crossing in front of cars, jumping up and down off the curb, and being cited by a police officer for reckless walking. As part of the arrangement you could actually hear auto horns, and police sirens. It was a great little piece and it was very well performed.

From fun jaywalking in the streets Richard next presented a very slow and sexy "I'm in the Mood for Love," written in 1935 by Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Field and introduced by Francis Langford in the movie "Every Night At Eight" Yes the Dickinson Organ has a stop for sexy (just kidding).

"Mexican Fire Dance" written by Albert Marland was next on the program and slow and sexy it was not... Once again the music and arrangement almost conjured up a silent film with rousing desert chases followed by stops in a restful hacienda/oasis and then on to more chases. It was a great theater organ piece, nicely performed and then followed by signs of approval in the form of sustained applause by the Dickinson audience.

A medley of 4 tunes followed providing a nice change of pace, "The Best things in Life are Free," "My Blue Heaven," "My Heart Stood Still" and the jazzy "Shakin' the Blues Away." These songs all had one thing in common, they were written in 1927.

The program concluded with a beautifully performed rendition of the "Poet and Peasant Overture" written in 1925 by Franz Von Suppe' for his opera of the same name. The audience showed its approval by giving Richard thunderous applause and a standing ovation.

Finally, for his encore, Richard chose the famous Dixieland Jazz piece "Muskrat Ramble," again providing a complete change of pace. His arrangement was terrific, featuring many organ voices from sweet to down and dirty, plus extensive use of the piano. In listening to him play this piece one wonders how he managed it with just ten fingers and two feet. Watching him play gives the answer, super -- almost magical pedaling and keyboard dexterity. It was fun to hear and fun to watch and it brought down the house, as they say, with a thundering second standing ovation.

Many thanks to Richard Hills for a great evening of good music well performed on the magnificent Dickinson Kimball Organ.