
70. The Virgil Fox Show

The last time I saw Virgil inside the Riverside Church was when he was to attend a concert I played (that he had invited me to give on the Summer Concert Series) in August 1965, shortly after his resignation became effective. Virgil told me he intended to come to my concert, but that he had decided to listen from the triforium level two or three floors above the nave. He felt I wouldn't want to put up with the mobs of fans and well-wishers he expected he would attract. I remember that just before the last work on my program (Max Reger's "Introduction and Fugue on 'How Brightly Shines the Morning Star'") he bowed and blew me a kiss from the triforium, his beaming face framed in the beautiful Gothic arches that line the third floor level along the entire length of the nave. I believe that was the last time he entered the Riverside Church until more than 14 years later, when he went to begin his rehearsals for a triumphal return concert in May, 1979.

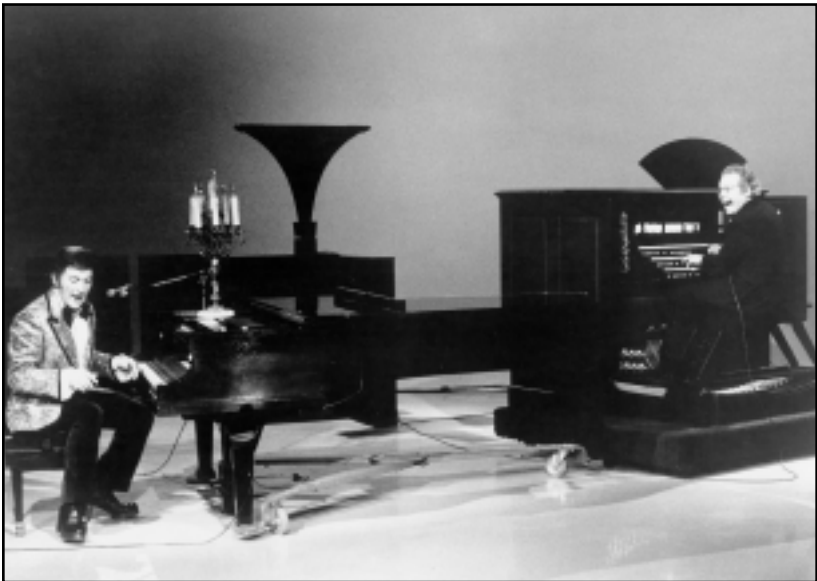
In the meantime, it was difficult for him to pass by the church every time he drove in and out of Manhattan along the West Side Highway, glancing furtively in the direction of the great Gothic tower. He made funny faces of disgust, saying, "There's old Rubbersides," and inventing a few new disparaging names and ill wishes for his detractors there.

An era ended; but more exciting times were beckoning toward this talented musical giant. He played more concerts than ever in the coming seasons, partly because of the availability of Black Beauty. He also received national television coverage when Richard and Marshall arranged for Virgil to hire a nationally known music publicist, Alix Williamson. When he appeared on the "Ed Sullivan Show" with Black Beauty, a near disaster was averted after a donkey, who was part of the animal act to appear that night, stomped on one of the main cables bringing power to the organ. Nevertheless, all went well. His appearance on the "Mike Douglas Show" was such a success that he appeared several times. He always wanted to be on the "Johnny Carson Show," as Virgil especially liked him; but the answer was always "No." Johnny Carson didn't like the organ ("Too funereal"). Too bad, for Johnny would have had a hoot of a time with Virgil and his wicked sense of humor. During one of his appearances on the

“Mike Douglas Show” the legendary Liberace joined him. For once in his life, Virgil was at a loss to know how he could outshine and outdress this legendary showman. Virgil and Liberace got on well. Liberace commented that he envied the rhinestones in the heels of Virgil’s shoes. This comment amused Virgil, because he knew that Liberace actually had the same shoes! When Richard had spied them in Lefcourt’s window while shopping with Virgil on Madison Avenue, the sales clerk told them that Liberace had previously bought two pairs. Liberace was gracious, and impressed with Virgil’s gift and humor. Virgil’s pet name for Liberace was “Lib, Honey.” They played “Tea for Two” on the show as a duet for piano and organ. The audience roared its approval!

Dick Cavett was also fond of Virgil, interviewing him twice. When Virgil was on “The David Frost Show,” in his usual fashion, he took over the interview. For example, Frost asked a question about the organ. Virgil didn’t want to deal with questions about anything but himself; and so he went off on his own. After a commercial break, Frost welcomed back the audience to “The Virgil Fox Show.”

Virgil quickly responded: “This always has been, and always will be, the wonderful David Frost Show,” but Frost had made his point.



*Virgil Fox's Rodgers organ speakers outperform Liberace's candelabra
(Mike Douglas Show)*

Richard Torrence

Radio hosts loved to invite Virgil because he gave such good interviews—and got such good responses! For example, once, when Virgil was discussing his playing technique, an interviewer got the following written message from the famous virtuoso pianist Earl Wild: “Dear Virgil. If you need help in fingering your passages, give me a call!”

Another time, on one of his many interviews with Bob Sherman, who hosted a morning show for many years on WQXR in New York, Virgil launched into one of his diatribes about “purists” and “maggots,” comparing certain organists to “a pack of dogs, running around in a circle, smelling their....”

At that point, he broke off, and Bob went nervously on to a recorded commercial (for “Odal” mouthwash—which seemed unusually appropriate). Unfortunately, the engineers turned off Bob’s microphone but not Virgil’s. Virgil went on to say, “I was going to say, smelling their own bungholes!”

We were all listening back at the office, and we went into a state of shock.

Right after the show, Virgil called me. The first thing I said was, “Do you realize that you said ‘bungholes’ on the air?”

There was a second’s pause; then Virgil said—emphatically, “Good!”

My own career was growing nicely, also, thanks to Community Concerts and Columbia Artists. I think Virgil was secretly pleased with my success, although he rarely let on. When I had my first tour of more than ten concerts, I remember Virgil said, “Ho! Ho! Ho! I hear you’ve been on tour! Were you able to buy a postage stamp when you returned?” He was fishing around to see what kind of fees I was getting. He couldn’t bear the thought of my receiving money for a concert that possibly could have been his. “Don’t let them get you too cheap, Kid!” That meant he would get fewer concerts in his mind, because his fee was getting higher and higher, and he was worried I’d give a similar concert for much less money, and he would suffer.

There was also the matter of using Black Beauty. “What if a date comes in for me later on, and Teddy’s booked with my organ. What then?” He was wrong, however, because he actually got more concerts, even with the higher fee and the busy organ. The organ was so

heavily booked, in fact, that Richard was able to convince the Rodgers Organ Company to provide a second touring organ for me, the Worth/Crow Duo, Joyce Jones, and some of the other artists that Richard now represented. Rodgers provided an additional organ in the new touring truck, a three-manual theatre organ for Andrew Crow.

Richard had created the Worth/Crow Duo in order to serve the Community Concert audience that appreciated popular music as much as (or more!) than classical. (Richard created a motto for us that claimed we were “Worth Crowing About!”) I would begin each of the concerts on the classical instrument. Andrew would then play a group of solo pieces on the theatre organ, ending with a short silent film of the kind for which the theatre organ was originally developed. On the third section of each program, we used both consoles to play Andrew’s arrangements of “Harper Valley PTA,” “Pomp and Circumstance,” and the “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

Audiences loved the program, and Andy and I had great fun. Although Virgil seem genuinely pleased with our success, if we were appearing in Great Bend, Kansas and Virgil was appearing at the Royal Festival Hall in London, he was still a bit piqued that he might have played our date as well—collecting both fees!

Columbia Artists had an important affair every fall when Community Concert salespeople would converge on New York for a week’s conference of listening to new talent. Andy and I were fortunate enough to showcase for them in Carnegie Hall. We were also invited to a swank dinner dance at the Pierre Hotel. After dinner, the Columbia managers brought up their artists to be introduced to the salespeople. Michael Reis represented Virgil, the Worth/Crow Duo, and me. When he introduced Virgil, the crowd roared its appreciation. Then he introduced a few of his other artists. When he introduced me, they roared just as loud for me as for Virgil, and I took my place on the stage of the ballroom next to him. He put his arm around me and whispered, “I’m so proud of you, Teddo!” I was thrilled to stand next to this “King of Instrumentalists,” for he had made me feel like a prince!

After leaving Riverside, Virgil’s concert career was really able to flourish. His fees increased, and the number of his bookings grew. His fame, however—except for rare orchestra dates and recordings—was still mostly limited to the “organ world.”

In those days, I used to refer to the world of organists collectively as “the worst world in the world!” Virgil would scream with laughter—and heartily agree! He said if I never played another note, I’d go down in history as having made the most comprehensive statement about the organ world that had ever been made in this century!

Andrew Crow

The following are excerpts from a two-week history of my activities moving the Rodgers touring organ around the country in March 1969.

March 13, up at nine for a concert with VF scheduled in Devils Lake, North Dakota. Hear about flooding road conditions and have to get to Jefferson City, Missouri in the next four days. I start about 10:30 a.m., and drive through lakes of water, sometimes as high as the hubcaps on the trailer. In some places, there are dikes on either side of the road with the water level higher than the road itself.

Five miles out of Topeka, have a blow out on the trailer. While changing wheels, I visit my Aunt, who happens to live in Topeka, leaving the trailer and truck to be serviced. Buy a new tire and scrounge around town until I find a wheel to fit the trailer. Find one that’s bent, but the wheel size is wrong; obsolete, they tell me. A junkyard provides what I need for exactly one dollar.

Virgil’s concert the next afternoon is so staggering as to warrant four standing ovations!

March 21, meet Ted Worth in the Toledo airport and we drive to Van Wert, Ohio. Those in charge of the concert have failed to carefully read the instructions that Richard Torrence sends in advance. (They’re supposed to walk through the same pathway the organ console will take—with a measuring stick. It seems like no amount of telephone calls, either from the management or from me, gets people to follow the instructions!) Therefore, the organ won’t go through the doors onto the stage. The afternoon is taken up rounding up cement blocks and plywood sheets to make a platform based on the floor that is high enough for the audience to see. By six that night, the lights are set and Ted gives his usual stunning performance.

March 24, Ted and I arrive in Rolla, Missouri at 2:05 in the morning to meet the movers. Unfortunately, those in charge at

Rolla have failed to read the instructions at all, so the organ won't go through the door, not to mention up the 37 steps behind the door. There are some frantic telephone calls, but by noon, we get the organ installed into the local armory and I'm exhausted. The acoustics are as good as they can get—in a cement room with a dirt floor. Ted practices all afternoon and I try for some lighting effects with crude spotlights set on hat racks. Ah, show biz! Ted gets two standing ovations.

Next morning I meet the movers at 7:00 a.m., load the organ, and meet Ted at 9:30, and we start for Hot Springs, South Dakota, about 1,200 miles away.

Have serious engine trouble about 20 miles out of Columbia, Missouri, which is made obvious by an incredible pounding and knocking. Am able to ease the machine into a small town called Booneville. Tell them our plight and tight schedule. They stop the whole place and replace the main and rod bearings in the engine.

Next day, make it to Alliance, Nebraska by 2:45 a.m., about 900 miles. I drive about 700 of it and Ted the other 200. Hot Springs, South Dakota is about 150 miles from here but the snow is falling heavily so we rest at the Drake Hotel in Alliance for two and a half hours and start out again for Hot Springs. We arrive at 12:30 p.m., and I let Ted off at the hotel and go directly to the school auditorium where I meet the movers. In the meantime, Ted gets into his tuxedo, plays the afternoon concert cold to 800 people while I grab my suitcase from the truck, put on a suit, and play the encores. I must say, Ted's dialogue backstage to me is totally different from what the audience gets!

Load up the organ, and go out to supper with our hosts, who provide us with a few good belts. By 11:00 p.m., I'm sound asleep, and I mean sound asleep!

Next morning, March 28, we drive to Denver. Bed looks good about 2:00 a.m.

Arrive at Riverton, Wyoming about 2:30 p.m. An hour later, we move the organ into the armory and onto the "stage," which is a flatbed truck. Our movers are Indians who are prisoners in a local jail, supervised by the Chief of Police and a few deputies. These prisoners, I'm told, are thieves, and I catch one trying to run off with my hydraulic jack and stop him. (He must have made off with it later, because the jack is now missing!) The concert takes place that night, and it seems like everyone in the town is present. There

are no lighting effects, just naked light bulbs blazing away, but the crowd is enthusiastic.

Arrangements are made to move the organ out the following morning. I'm there at 9:00 a.m., and so are the Indians, the Chief of Police, and his deputies. By noon, Ted and I are on our way to Rawlins, Wyoming.

In the afternoon, we meet the movers, who are prisoners from the state prison. The organ is moved into place in the Community Center. Someone finally read the instructions!

Sunday's easy. Nothing missing.

Next morning, Ted is supposed to catch the only daily flight out of Rawlins, 7:10 a.m. to Denver, but the plane never arrives for some reason, so he rides with me to Laramie, Wyoming, and catches another flight to Denver.



*The Worth/Crow Duo with a Rodgers American Classic organ
and a Rodgers theatre organ*