

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates

In Memoriam: Karel Paukert, 1935-2025

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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

When his father was listening to forbidden wartime broadcasts of Radio Free Europe, the little boy was to sit outside and rap on the window if anyone should come near. Towards the end of the war the child was sent to fetch home some milk, and along the way to make the surreptitious drop of a note for anti-Nazi partisans.¹ A little Czech boy with an empty milk jug in one hand and an espionage communique in the other: there he was, balancing the quotidian with the momentous. Indeed, a skillful balancing of one thing with another was a lifelong theme for Karel Paukert.

Sometimes the balance was quite literal. Who can forget Karel Paukert at the opening of a packed Christmas Eve service, responding to a loud cipher (the stuck note of an organ pipe) by scaling the mighty Holtkamp as if it were a climbing wall. Up he'd go, swiftly and nimbly – in his dark pants and black turtleneck, looking something like Spiderman but even more like a cat burglar – conquering the cipher and swiftly descending to his bench. That was one sort of balancing act, to be sure! But I am thinking of many others.

His repertoire was a balance of Traditional and Contemporary. In Evanston he was founder of the uber-traditional Bach Week festival. At the Cleveland Museum of Art he curated concerts that leaned emphatically towards new music and modern composition.

His also was a balance of Sacred and Secular. Holding simultaneously the post of music director in this house of worship alongside that of curator of musical arts at the CMA. This balance of sacred and secular was not always compartmentalized, however. Sacred works made their way into the museum; and here at St. Paul's one never knew what secular nugget would appear improvisationally in an organ voluntary: a little Gershwin, a little John Williams, a full-voiced Holtkamp rendition of "Happy Birthday." Once when wearing my Holy Trinity chasuble adorned with the symbol of three fish in a circle, I realized during communion that Karel was riffing on the tune of the Three Little Fishes Song: "... they swam and they swam right over the dam." (I'm quite certain Dr. David Mason put him up to it.)

Another thing Karel Paukert balanced – perhaps unwittingly and perhaps not – was his own capacity to be entirely endearing and colossally infuriating. On the one hand, it was impossible not to love him: that conspiratorial twinkle in his eye; that impish sense of humor; the loyalty of his friendship; his equal concern for those of high station and those who carried out supportive tasks – technicians, custodians, museum guards. Everyone felt known and cared about by Karel. And so we loved him back. Yet he could drive us crazy. Newsletter deadlines were an irrelevance. His concept of time, in general, was – shall we say – fluid. At St. Paul's we were as proud as we could be of his prowess on the bench; yet rector after rector pleaded with him

not to forget that when he was playing hymns, people needed to be able to find the melody! He left us in his improvisational dust; he just couldn't help himself.

In so many ways – trivial and not so trivial – it was not always easy to find one's self in Karel-land. But here's the thing: Love enables forgiveness; and the experience of forgiveness deepens love. And so it was with Karel.

Well, so, the many balancing acts of Karel Paukert: East and West. Traditional and Contemporary. Sacred and Secular. Endearing and Infuriating. And here's another: At the end of each December, Karel would leave behind the happy hymnody of "Joy to the World" and the festive French Noëls and return once more to his lifelong passion for Olivier Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*. Every year Karel offered his Messiaen recital for Epiphany. For many of us this was a challenge. We struggled with Messiaen's complex cosmology, his inexorable modernity, his unfamiliar harmonic systems. But because it was Karel, we came and we listened.

Olivier Messiaen said of his composition, "Illuminating the truth of the Catholic faith is the overriding aspect of my work, the noblest, and no doubt [most] valuable." One music journalist notes that "*La Nativité* shouldn't be judged as a concert work: it is one believer's exploration of what gives meaning to his life, a testament to faith and a grateful prayer. ... [It is] a score bristling with complex theological concepts, yet tempered by a simple all-yielding faith."ⁱⁱ

By some measures Karel Paukert was more concert organist than church musician. But make no mistake: he loved his service here; he loved having the closest seat to the altar. And one more axis of balance in his life is this, shared powerfully with his beloved Messiaen: the synthesis of brilliant, complex music with profound but simple faith. He returned to it again and again, and he was determined to share it with the rest of us.

Many of you have heard my conviction that music is the church's 8th sacrament – maybe even the 3rd. You know a sacrament is an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," something tangible to our senses of sight, sound, taste, which communicates things that are not tangible to our senses. Spiritual things. Cosmic things. True things. Music, I need not tell you, has the power to do exactly that. To move us deeply, from the inside out. To transport us to another place. To make manifest the glory and mystery of God; the reconciling love of Christ, and what St Paul calls "sighs too deep for words."ⁱⁱⁱ

The joint Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on the church's calendar tomorrow is a celebration of complementarity: the impulsive fisherman and the deliberate scholar; the apostle to the Jews and the apostle to the Gentiles. Together their witness to the gospel goes far beyond the sum of their individual labors. They complete each other. So it has been for those of us who've had the extraordinary privilege to serve in this pulpit, with Karel Paukert at that bench. At our best, our joint witness to the gospel has gone beyond the sum of our separate, respective vocations. Karel (like Kevin and Steve and Richard and many of you in this

gathering) has been a sacramental agent; the steward of music as an audible sign of a spiritual grace. And Karel's particular stewardship reflected that of his beloved Messiaen, who while he left detailed instructions on his work, also expected the musician to engage it with the "improvisational spirit which he believed to be at the heart of authentic religious experience."^{iv}

An improvisational spirit at the heart of authentic religious experience. That might just encapsulate Karel's vocation. Of course, his whole self was improvisational. So no doubt his theology had its unorthodox elements. But given his return again and again to *La Nativité du Seigneur* – which he would practice in depth every year as though he'd never seen it before – I am confident that among its movements are named the devotional building blocks of Karel's faith: *La vierge et l'enfant* (The Virgin and Child); *Desseins éternels* (Eternal purposes); *le Verb* (the Word); and above all, *Dieu parmi Nous* (God Among Us).

Karel Paukert experienced and loved "God among us," just as he also helped us to experience "God among us." And thus am I certain that as God has always been with Karel, so now Karel is with God. From today's proclamation in the Gospel of John [6:37-40]:

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

This is the Gospel promise which we claim for Karel today. Not lost; raised up.

Finally – one last recollection. It happened pretty much every Sunday. The choir and chancel party would be lined up in the narthex. Karel would conclude the prelude. It was time for the processional hymn. Now, in the practice of ordinary mortals, the sequence is clear: the prelude ends; there is a moment of silence; and the opening hymn begins. The lead crucifer knows exactly when to start the parade; the congregation knows when to stand. But for Karel that was much too mechanical and pedestrian. At his hand the conclusion of the prelude was often almost imperceptible as he began further to improvise upon its theme. Oh so subtly the motifs of the prelude began to evolve – perhaps meditatively, perhaps grandly – while chords and snatches of the opening hymn began to appear. Slowly the prelude would subside as the hymn took over. But who could say, really, when that happened?!

And so the procession did not begin. The acolyte did not know when to step off. The rector was scarcely any wiser. The choir had as many opinions on the matter as members. And the congregation was standing/sitting, starting/stopping, bouncing up and down in their pews as though on horseback. Even when Karel had segued into what he would consider the "initial play-through" of the hymn, it was so thoroughly embellished as to be an auditory game of hide-and-seek to the rest of us.

Dear friends: I do not know what the transition from this life to the next looks like or feels like. Jesus says that the Realm of God is already among us if we have eyes to see. So perhaps the transition has more continuity than we believe. Like so many things, it's not as binary as we think. So I imagine our journey towards God is not unlike a Paukert Processional: we are not entirely sure where it begins or how; we are not altogether certain where or how it will lead. But our journey towards God is a truly beautiful thing resembling the improvisational spirit with which Karel lived, a spirit which might well be at the heart of authentic religion.

The improvisational building blocks and through-lines from here to there, from this life to the next, are Grace and Forgiveness and Beauty and Harmony and Love ... and New Beginnings. It is that life which is offered to me and to you. It is that life in which now dwells Karel Paukert.

Christ is risen. Karel is risen with him. Alleluia. Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates
Rector XV of St. Paul's, 2004-2014
Bishop XVI of Massachusetts, 2014-2024

ⁱ National Czech and Slovak Digital Museum and Library; digital library
[Karel Paukert · NCSML Digital Library](#)

ⁱⁱ Paul Riley, www.classical-music.com (BBC Music magazine online), 3-11-2024:
[La Nativité du Seigneur: a guide to Messiaen's Christmas organ cycle and its best recordings](#) (paragraph 10)

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 8:26

^{iv} Riley, *ibid.*[ii], paragraph13.