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Coffee Break

with Stephen Price

In 2023, Stephen (Stef) Price joined the music faculty of the University of Washington as the inaugural Paul B. Fritts Faculty Fellow and Artist in Residence, and as head of organ studies. Following undergraduate studies at Western Connecticut State University, Stef won a Fulbright scholarship to study in Toulouse, France. He went on to receive MM and DM degrees at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. His debut CD, Paris Impact: Organ Suites, was released in 2021 on the Raven label. Stef spoke to Alex Hodgkinson.



Stephen Price

The organ program at UW took a three-year hiatus after my predecessor, Dr. Carole Terry, retired in 2019—partly due to the leadership transition, and then COVID. Generous gifts from [Washington-based organbuilder] Paul Fritts and the Seattle AGO Chapter provided the department with financial stability, and I was hired to revitalize the program in 2023.

The situation here is perhaps unique: we have a Fritts organ, a larger instrument in the German Baroque style, but we don't have a big symphonic concert instrument on campus, and so we use several instruments around Seattle for lessons, practice, and recitals. The students learn how to adapt their playing to different organs—organs in different styles. If they're learning a piece from the French Romantic repertoire, there's a wonderful Fisk in town that's built in the French Romantic style. And there's an instrument built in the American Classic style, and so on.

So students take their pieces to instruments specifically designed for that repertoire, and can learn about the characteristics, performance practice, style, and concepts of those works. We are also developing relationships with the churches in the city, and often the students are given valuable firsthand experience of life as a church organist. It's a positive experience for everyone, and it helps strengthen our links with the community. There is a lot of music going on in Seattle. Many members of our music faculty play for the Seattle Symphony, for example. Seattle is a place where you can make a living as a freelancing musician if you choose to.

When a student comes for their first lesson, as a teacher I'm trying to understand where they are, what level they're at, and what they need to focus on in particular. And then over the course of their time here, I encourage them to develop independence at the instrument, whether that be in terms of registration concepts, performance practices, stylistic concepts, artistry, or other areas. Watching that progression is very rewarding, and I try to give my students space to have conversations, from an informed position, about their musical ideas.

Physical gesture is a very important part of my pedagogical practice. My own dissertation involved creating videos of organ pieces with perpetual motion (a scherzo, for example) and works in lyrical style, to compare how the player's body motions impact the performance in both styles. I have to credit my own teacher and disser-

tation advisor, Janette Fishell from Indiana University, who regularly implements this idea in her own pedagogy and performance. And her teacher, my mentor, Wilma Jensen, who recently published a book, *Organ Footnotes*, that extensively discusses physical motions and developing healthy habits.

We have just completed the Black Composers Project, a video concert involving several players and organs. It features music for the organ, both original works for the instrument and also adaptations, sometimes in collaboration with other instruments.

I am African American—that is my heritage—and I work in a world where there are not many African American concert organists in the classical idiom. Before I embarked on this project, I knew of a few compositions by black composers, but I really wanted a chance to explore the depth of the repertoire. And I'm very much interested in the evolution of music over time, so I wanted to see how far back I could go. We started with Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges [1745–1799], a composer of the Classical era. He was a fascinating character, and there's actually a recent movie about his life and work as a violinist and composer—and champion fencer!

From there, we moved forward to Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Florence Price, and Scott Joplin, and we also included music by several living composers. Last summer, I was invited to give the

premiere of a piece by Eurydice Osterman at the AGO National Convention. I was not familiar with her work until this invitation by the AGO, and it made me want to explore more of her music. David Hurd is a well-known organist and improviser, based in New York, who has contributed so much to church music, so I wanted to include his voice too.

My aim was to show a progression, to look at these pieces in an analytical way, and to understand them not just as works by black composers, but also in terms of how they contribute to the larger canon and how they can be incorporated into the overall study of organ literature. I'm hoping that it will inspire organists to explore more works by black composers.

The program is about an hour long, and it's on YouTube (tinyurl.com/uw-black-composers). It's received a lot of traction so far. I originally had no intention of carrying the project further, but the reaction has been very positive, and many people have asked what's next. We will see!

The best piece of advice I have ever received is to take time to cultivate your own ideas and projects, and then to execute them at the highest level possible. And to go into everything with a willingness to learn and a lot of adaptability and flexibility.

Stef Price is represented in the United States by Seven Eight Artists.



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