

Coffee Break

with Layla Joshi



Layla Joshi

Layla Joshi is a talented young singer, pianist, and organist from New Jersey. A rising senior at the William Penn Charter School, she was also a speaker at the AGO's first virtual conference for young organists, where she gave a presentation on the history and influence of the Danish organbuilding firm Marcussen & Søn. I spoke to Layla to learn more about her musical background and interests.

ALEX HODGKINSON

I grew up about five minutes from our local Presbyterian church, so in a way the organ was always there—just slightly out of reach. I'd been singing in the choir since I was about five, which means a lot of my earliest musical memories are of our church's organ—this huge sound and great physical presence behind us in the loft. Sometimes we'd be singing and it would just fill the space, like it wasn't just accompanying us, it was carrying everyone along with it. I remember thinking, very clearly, *This is what an instrument is supposed to do*. It wasn't just about notes; it was about people coming together around a sound. But I never imagined I'd get to play it.

Then COVID happened, and like a lot of people, my brother and I suddenly had a lot of time and not much to do. I'd been playing piano for a few years, so one day—slightly on a whim—I asked our choir director if I could try the organ. I think I expected a polite no, or at least a “maybe later.” Instead he said, “Of course.” We went up to the instrument with some Bach partitas and other things we'd been working on. And that was it, really. We were completely hooked.

There's something about the organ that you can't quite explain until you're sitting on the bench. It's not just bigger than the piano—it's a completely different way of thinking. You're shaping sound in space, not just playing notes. Even that first time, just experimenting, I remember thinking, *This is the coolest instrument in the world!*

After that, I started taking lessons—sometimes weekly, sometimes every couple of weeks—and I've loved it ever since. My teacher, Joel Krott, has been a huge influence. He trained in Denmark, and we actually play a Danish organ, a Marcussen. From early on, he was also incredibly generous about letting me play in services. He encouraged me to play preludes and during Communion, and at the time, those felt like the biggest moments imaginable. And gradually those experiences just built on one another.

I come from a musical family. My dad played violin, clarinet, and piano when he was younger, and he actually majored in music. My mom sang in a cappella groups all through school, and she plays a bit of piano too. So our house has always been full of music—listening to it, talking about it, playing it. Music is normal in our household.



What *did* feel unusual, though, was being a young organist. People are often surprised when you tell them you're an organist. You start to wonder if you're the only one. That's one of the reasons that the AGO's young organist conference really appealed to me. I'd seen it advertised in AGO materials, and my dad encouraged me to apply.

At the time, I'd been working on a research project—I had some ideas, but nothing fully developed. So I submitted it, slightly on a gamble. And then I got an email saying I'd been accepted. So I had to actually write the thing! The topic was the organbuilding firm Marcussen, and what drew me to it initially was very simple: Their instruments feel different. Everything blends in a way that makes sense. You can pull almost any combination of stops and get something coherent, something beautiful. Each voice is distinct, but they also belong together. Compared to some of the larger, more orchestral instruments I'd played, there was a clarity and delicacy that I found really compelling. Most of my research was online—books, articles, historical documents—but I also spent time at the organ itself, trying to connect what I was reading with what I was hearing and feeling when I played.

As I dug deeper, I realized that there was a much bigger story there. Marcussen played a crucial role in the Organ Reform Movement, especially during World War II, when traditional centers of organbuilding were unable to work. They drew on detailed studies of historic Dutch organs and combined that with newer technologies—things like pneumatic systems and modern console features—to create instruments that were both historically informed and forward-looking. That balance really fascinated me: the idea that you could honor the past without just copying it, and innovate without losing what made the instrument special in the first place.

Presenting that research at the AGOYO conference was . . . terrifying, honestly! This wasn't a school assignment; it was something I'd chosen to do, something I really cared about. But it was quite niche, so I wondered to myself, *Does anyone else care about this?*

But that was the best part of the conference. Suddenly I was surrounded by other young organists—people who *did* care, and people who were thinking about the future of the instrument in all kinds of interesting ways. There were presentations on digital organs and accessibility, on social media and building audiences, on things that felt very immediate and relevant. It made the whole field feel alive and evolving, not just rooted in the past.

If any young organists are thinking about attending the AGOYO conferences or even submitting some work, I would say definitely go for it! And that ties into the best piece of advice I've absorbed over the years. It's this idea that the world is full of open doors. The opportunities are there—you just have to walk through the door. For me, that's meant saying yes to things: trying the organ in the first place, applying to the conference, presenting research, even when it felt slightly out of my comfort zone. And also just enjoying where I am in the process. Not everything has to be a huge, defining moment. Sometimes it's just about being in the loft, with that sound behind you, thinking, *This is why I'm doing this*. And honestly, that feeling hasn't changed since the first time I sat down at the organ.

Alex Hodgkinson, FRCO, is director of music for the Cathedral and Diocese of Madison, Wis.

