

Maxine Thévenot • In The Press

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VICTOR TOGNI (1935–1965) FROM TANGANYIKA TO TORONTO

By Maxine Thévenot

Tanganyika was an East African republic within the Commonwealth of Nations, under British rule until it finally gained independence in 1961. In 1964, it joined with the islands of Zanzibar to form the United Republic of Tanzania. Tanzania is about half the size of the state of Alaska and is bordered by Kenya and Uganda on the north, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda on the west, and Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia on the south.

Victor Togni was born on the Ides of March, 1935, in Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika, of Swiss parents. His life spanned 30 years and was filled to the brim with much travel and study on the European continent and in North America. His joie de vivre inspired and touched everyone who met him during his short life. On March 29, 1965, while on his way to Montreal from Toronto to record an organ recital for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Mr. Togni and his producer were involved in a fatal car collision near Gananoque, Ontario. Victor left behind his young bride, Margaret, whom he had married in September 1958, and a son, Peter. Peter-Anthony Togni is now a composer, broadcaster, organist, and conductor who resides in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he is host of CBC Radio Two's national program, *Weekender*. In 2006, Peter was nominated for a Juno award in the Classical Composer of the Year category for his work, *Illuminations*, written for the Sanctuary Trio and the Sanctuary String Orchestra.

Victor Togni studied with 20th-century masters of the European organ tradition including Marcel Dupré, Rolande Falcinelli, Fernando Germani, Jean-Jacques Grunenwald, Jean Langlais, and Olivier Messiaen. Like many young organ students of the French tradition, Victor studied repertoire and the art of improvisation. However, it was improvisation and the use of Gregorian chant that resonated with him in the most powerful and communicative way. The development of his improvisatory skill through study led him to consider moving to North America. It was on June 26, 1964, that Victor won first prize (with a unanimous decision) in Improvisation at the National Convention of the American Guild of Organists, held in Philadelphia. This

was the first time that an improvisation competition of this kind was sponsored in North America. The prize was donated by the Casavant organbuilding firm of St. Hyacinthe, Quebec.

In addition to Victor's skill in the art of improvisation, composition was of interest to him and before he died he completed one organ work, *Five Liturgical Inventions*, an unaccompanied choral work, *Alleluia!*, and the mass setting, *A Parish Mass*. There are also numerous sketches, some of which were destroyed by the composer and some of which are extant.

The *Parish Mass* shows his skill in emulating the Gregorian chant style with a revised English text in a practical liturgical form. The short sacred choral work, *Alleluia!*, was published posthumously and has since been recorded. The *Five Liturgical Inventions* are based on the chants of *Jesu dulcis-Verbum supernum*, *Ave Maria*, *Adoro te devote*, *Laudate Dominum*, and *Alleluia*. I spoke with Peter Togni about the musical legacy of his father.

MAXINE THÉVENOT: Did your father come from a musical family?

PETER TOGNI: In a way, yes. My grandfather, who was Swiss, played the piano and accordion, and loved music. My father had an uncle who played piano rather well, but my dad was really the first one in the family to succeed as a musician. Victor, or "Bibo" as he was affectionately called, was the eldest of 13 children and was very much seen as the apple of his mother's eye. Since each of the children had a servant, there were often more than 25 people in the house, and as a result she was a wonderful cook. My grandfather was quite the entrepreneur. He once owned and operated a tea plantation, had dealings with the railroads, was an accountant, and there is even a story about the diamond mines in South Africa. But alas, he never got rich.

MT: How did your father's interest in the organ begin?

PT: My father loved to travel on his own. He often would stay with relatives in the various cities he traveled to. Victor left Africa at 14 to study music in Switzerland, and had already had the opportunity to conduct the school orchestra in Dar es Salaam, then the capital of Tanganyika, by the time he was eight. His musical studies really began at the Abbey of Einsiedeln. He studied cello, but being left-handed this posed problems and he switched to the organ. It was there

that he heard many magnificent organs, and it was also during this time that his interest in becoming a monk began. He was one notch shy of being a novice by the time he was 16, but this vocation was short-lived. During his time at the abbey, my dad studied organ with Fr. Baptist Bolliger, OSB, a fine improviser who discovered this gift in my father.

MT: Who were his teachers beginning with the earliest?

PT: Father Baptist Bolliger was his first organ teacher. He went to Italy at 19/20 years of age and studied at the Academy of St. Cecilia in Rome with Fernando Germani. Germani was his first real mentor. My dad didn't like practicing and so he was often found literally tied to the bench by Germani . . . especially his knees! I know of a funny story, which I'm not sure I should tell, but here goes. My dad told Germani that he was off to practice. Instead he decided to go for a walk and the next thing he knew, he saw Germani heading towards him on the same road. My father ducked into the nearest shop to hide. Dad thought that Germani hadn't spotted him. A tap on the shoulder quickly proved otherwise. Germani exclaimed, "So this is what you do when you are not practicing, you hang out in lingerie shops!"

When my father was about 21/22 years old he traveled to France to study with Jean Langlais and Marcel Dupré. He studied repertoire and improvisation with both masters. Langlais treated him like a son. They had a father-son type relationship. He also studied with Rolande Falcinelli. While at the École Normale in Paris he studied with Messiaen. The two of them got along very well; they were close. Dad liked Messiaen's music, but was not as inspired by his improvisations. He also studied theory, composition, and analysis for a short time with Nadia Boulanger. He then traveled to the U.K. to study at the Royal Academy of Music, but I don't know with whom he studied there. It wasn't until he was 27 years old that he began studies with Jean-Jacques Grunenwald at the Geneva Conservatory. With him, dad studied improvisation and composition. After attending the organ class at the Geneva Conservatory for a year he was awarded the First Prize for Virtuosity in organ performance and improvisation, the First Prize of the Rochette improvisation competition, and the Otto Barblan organ prize.

MT: Do you know of any recollections regarding his years of study— either with particular teachers or particular locations?

PT: Jean-Jacques Grunenwald, was a real taskmaster. Victor was working on some facet of improvisation and I guess it wasn't going very well, as Grunenwald ran down the aisle of the hall crying, "Monsieur Togni, you

have met your Waterloo." At the actual examination, as he started the Bach D Major, one of the manuals quit altogether and he quickly had to re-register it on the fly on a different manual. What church positions did he hold? In Europe, Victor was organist at St. Gregory's Basilica in Rome from 1951 to 1953 and during this same time was the assistant organist to Fernando Germani at St. Peter's Basilica. He was the organist of the Lugano Cathedral, Switzerland. He was organist of the Calvin United Church in Pembroke, Ontario, in 1957, the First Baptist Church in Ottawa in 1958, and St. Columkille's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Pembroke in 1959. From 1960 to 1962, he was the organist at St. Basil's Church of St. Michael's College, Toronto, and professor of organ and improvisation at St. Michael's Cathedral Choir School. In 1962-63, he served as organist at St. Charles Borromeo in Magadino, Switzerland. In 1963, my father and our family moved back to Canada where he was appointed organist of Toronto's St. Michael's Catholic Cathedral, a position he held until his death.

MT: Why the move to Canada?

PT: It was the idea of greener pastures, like so many immigrants to Canada in the late 1950s. There was no family in Canada and so it was like starting completely fresh. It was harder and harder to find work and to also find your "place" in Europe. The competition was huge. So not unlike people like Healey Willan who emigrated from the U.K. to Canada, my father did the same thing. When he was 23 he set sail for New York City. My father hated flying, and so chose to take trains and boats wherever he went. It was in New York City that he heard that there was a position at Calvin United Church in Pembroke, Ontario, and so he made the journey north. He directed the senior choir, the boys' choir, and taught organ, theory, and Italian. My father was fluent in six languages and was seen as quite a dapper young man. It was in Pembroke that he met my mother, Margaret. [Memoir of Margaret Togni Fox, January 2007: "In October 1957, this exotic man arrived in our little town of Pembroke in Northern Ontario. I saw him one day leaving the Club Grill wearing dark glasses and a trench coat. That was it for me. In June 1958, he asked me to come for a ride in the old Chevy he had. It had air-con-ditioning in the floor! We stopped at the pump to get gas. When he got back in the car, he turned to me and said, "Margaret, will you marry me?" I said, "Pardon?" He repeated, "Will you marry me?" I said, "But you don't even know me?" He said, "Yes, I do and I have already spoken with your mother." I said, "Yes, of course I will." We went into the restaurant for coffee and wrote our names on a paper napkin. I still have it."] Although Victor led a bohemian lifestyle, his

faith was strong and he attended Mass every day.

MT: Could you list some of the venues where he performed in the U.S. and Canada?

PT: He toured regularly across Canada, broadcast for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and played the inaugural recital at St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral in Calgary, and also at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Edmonton. He worked at St. Basil's Church, which is the Collegiate Church of St. Michael's College, Toronto. Founded in 1856, it is administered by the Basilian Fathers. My father used to teach chant to the seminarians and played the organ for the Mass there. My father loved Gregorian chant and loved working with the priests. When Vatican II came along, it really broke his heart. In the U.S. he performed at the Catholic Cathedral of St. Paul, St. Paul, Minnesota. He won the first-ever improvisation prize awarded by the American Guild of Organists in 1964. He had to improvise a prelude and fugue on two given themes, written by Vincent Persichetti. The contestants were up in the attic of the church and given the theme only 15 minutes before they had to play. My dad had roughly worked out what he might do (expecting two more classical themes) but when he saw the themes he quickly changed his plan and during the improvisation of the fugue part he wove the two very different Persichetti themes together. After the competition he played a short recital on the famed Wanamaker organ in Philadelphia.

MT: What repertoire was he especially fond of?

When he first came to Toronto to play, the organ scene there was very much an English one. My dad was an exotic bird. He improvised! He played early Italian music including Frescobaldi, in addition to works of Soler, Bach (most of which he recorded live to tape for the CBC at St. Michael's), and contemporary music. He loved the music of Tournemire, Langlais, Dupré, Vierne (to a degree), and the music of his teacher, Grunenwald. My father always included improvisations on a given theme as part of his recitals.

MT: Which of his own compositions was he especially proud of?

PT: A lot of what he wrote was destroyed. Works were sketched and I have several of these sketches. He wrote an operetta; there are the beginnings of a Fantasy or Toccata. I also have sketches of the Alleluia! choral work and the Ave Maria choral work, which he paired together. The writing in these sketches is very large as my father had developed what is called keratoconus (conical cornea).

MT: Could you give some background to the Five

Liturgical Inventions?

PT: He started the sketches for these pieces while in Switzerland in 1962–63. He finished them after we returned to Canada from his studies in Switzerland. They had just been submitted for publication shortly before the accident that took his life. Gregorian chant was always very close to his heart and he often improvised on Gregorian themes after his recitals, so it would not be a surprise that he would weave melodies around these wonderful chants of the church. The last movement of the Five Liturgical Inventions, the "Alleluia," came out of an improvisation. The choir school graciously helped with the editing after the accident. The work was published posthumously.

MT: Have there been any tributes to your father in recent years?

There was a very well-attended tribute to my father in 2005 at St. Basil's (which would have been the year of his 70th birthday). Over 500 people were in attendance. There were four or five organists who performed that evening including William O'Meara, William Wright, and Brian Ray. The latter two were both students of my father. What legacy do you wish your father to be remembered for? Improvisation is what he loved. His personality was his strongest suit and this came out best in his improvisations. His ideas were fully formed, technically sound, lyrical, and he played so musically. The heart of who he was is in his improvisations. He had the philosophy of performing in a particular order, for self, for friends, and for an audience.

MT: As a composer and performer and like your father, a former Langlais student, do you attribute your association with the organ to a continuation of your father's legacy?

PT: Yes and no. Yes in many ways my own work is a continuation of my father's legacy. The sound of his organ playing is most certainly one of the first things I remember about my childhood. After he died I grew up with his recordings. I could say, thanks to that, he was my first improvisation teacher. Part of my own harmonic language is the same as his, the world of Gregorian chant and modality. His skill and innovation as both organist and improviser is something I shall always admire and look up to. I have, of course, been influenced in other ways that are very different from my father's musical landscape. My other strong influences are Russian Orthodox music and the northern music of Jean Sibelius. I'm writing sacred music, sometimes in a jazz idiom, sometimes in a sonic language—it relates to chant, it is modal, it is quasi-minimalistic, like Tavener. I am creating music that is "suspended."

In Sanctuary, the group that Jeff Reilly, Christoph Both, and I formed, we strive to meld together Christoph's German contemporary music esthetic with Jeff's free improvisatory style and my Messiaenic sound clusters to make a wonderful harmonic soup. I am working on a piece right now called, Lamentations of Jeremiah. It is a concerto for bass clarinet and choir to be performed by Jeffrey Reilly and the Elmer Isler Singers at the church of St. Mary Magdalene (Healey Willan's former church) in Toronto. For further details and upcoming performances of Sanctuary, visit www.sanctuarymusic.ca.

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APPENDIX

PUBLICATIONS

Alleluia!, Victor Togni. Gordon V. Thompson Music, copyright 1996, VTS4011. SAATBB choir a cappella.
A Parish Mass, Victor Togni. Catholic Book of Worship II, copyright Conca can Inc., Ottawa, 1981. Distributed by Gordon V. Thompson Music. Five Liturgical Inventions, Victor Togni. Gordon V. Thompson Music, Memorial Edition, copyright 1981. Distributed by Counterpoint Musical Services; www.counterpointmusic.ca.

RECORDINGS

Five Liturgical Inventions, Victor Togni (premiere recording).
Without Boundaries, Maxine Thévenot, organist. Raven CD OAR 890; www.ravencd.com.

Alleluia!, Victor Togni.
Christus, St. Mary's Basilica Gallery Choir, Halifax, Peter A. Togni, director.
TnT Productions (available from www.veritasbooks.ca).