

Paul Jacobs and Westminster Presbyterian Church in Summer

This summer, Westminster Presbyterian Church is excited to be back with live musical programs. The season concludes with one of Pittsburgh's favorite performers, organist Paul Jacobs. Paul's concert on August 27 will be his fifth at Westminster, rescheduled from March 2020. The pandemic may have canceled that March concert, but it led to what will be an unbroken record of five Westminster concerts during the summer. A concert with Paul Jacobs is always an exciting and uplifting experience. So plan now to spend a late summer evening hearing Paul's superb music making and delightful commentary.

On Friday, July 28, in the year 2000, young organist Paul Jacobs made musical history at Westminster Presbyterian Church in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. It was the 250th anniversary of the death of Johann Sebastian Bach, and Jacobs, age 23, paid an extraordinary tribute to this great composer. He played the complete solo organ works of Bach by memory over 18 hours on the sanctuary's 81-rank Austin organ. At the time, Jacobs was studying organ at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. But his home was in Washington County, not far from Westminster Church. So when this brilliant student of the organ decided to make his name in the musical world, he chose Westminster. He knew that the Austin organ was among the best in Pittsburgh and that the location, with plenty of parking, was perfect for his friends, family, and the many music lovers who would come to hear him play.

And they did come, in great numbers, from all over the Pittsburgh area. There was a spirit of excitement in the sanctuary – people knew something special was happening. Yet the marathon was informal with no pressure to sit still or stay for a set amount of time. People felt free to come and go. Some came early in the morning before work. Others came in the evening. Many stayed for hours at a time, often returning once, twice, or even more. Quite a few fans made a point of hearing both the first and the last pieces. It was a remarkable extended day of music – not only the highlight of that summer in Pittsburgh, but a feat that made an important mark in the field and launched a brilliant career for Paul Jacobs.

Members of the choir volunteered to keep Jacobs supplied with nutritious snacks and beverages. Other volunteers welcomed the many visitors. Even now, people who attended talk about the experience. For everyone, it was a rare treat to hear beyond Bach favorites, to the magnificent breadth and depth – and sheer volume – of Bach's creativity for the organ.

Bill Evans, the Director of Music and Arts at Westminster in 2000, graciously hosted the talented young organist who is now world famous. As the designer of Westminster's Austin organ, Bill knew that the organ would sound beautiful for 18 hours of Bach. Bill loved to nurture young talent, and he proudly watched Paul Jacobs achieve great success.

In 2011 the Austin organ turned 20, and the Westminster Music & Arts Series invited Paul Jacobs to play a concert to mark that milestone. Paul again chose summer, this time a Friday evening in late August. He played to a packed sanctuary of fans old and new. Two more concerts followed in August of 2014 and 2017. On March 15, 2020, we had planned to help Paul

celebrate the 20th anniversary year of his 18 hours of Bach. In the days before, Paul was practicing in the sanctuary and he had recorded an interview for WQED-FM radio. A large audience was expected. When the lockdown came, Paul's fans were greatly disappointed. Now, so many months later, it's time to look ahead and welcome Paul Jacobs back to Westminster.

Plan to come on August 27, help celebrate the Austin's 30th anniversary, and enjoy beautiful music by Bach, Handel, and others. The evening will also celebrate Paul's most recent honor, the 2021 International Performer of the Year Award presented by the American Guild of Organists. It recognizes that Paul's "fierce dedication to the organ, its importance not just as a solo instrument but also in symphonic life, and his advocacy of the necessity for culture in society have been recognized publicly over and over again." That is an apt description of America's most articulate and visionary leader in the field of organ music. Don't miss this opportunity to hear him perform and speak.

For more information and admission details, see www.organseries.org.

– Sara Kyle