

Paul Jacobs Plays Bach at Westminster: Twenty Years Later

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. This past summer, a local reporter came by Westminster to ask about Paul Jacobs' upcoming 20th anniversary of his Bach marathon. The reporter had come in July 2000 and is delighted that he'll get to hear Paul Jacobs play Bach again in 2020.

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. Although Bill recently passed away after a long illness, he was able to come to Paul Jacobs' most recent concert at Westminster, in 2017. He enjoyed it immensely. And no doubt he would have rejoiced at seeing and hearing this special Bach concert on March 15 in Westminster's lovely Georgian sanctuary.

Please join us as we help Paul Jacobs celebrate the 20th anniversary year of his 18 hours of Bach, a marathon that required enormous energy, musicality, and a bold confidence in the power of Bach's organ music to bring people out in the heat of summer to be moved by the power of the pipe organ and Bach's genius.

– Sara Kyle