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[www.theorganmag.com](http://www.theorganmag.com)

No 375  
Feb 2016-  
April 2016  
£ 6.00

Published since 1921

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# The Organist in America – 1: Dr Carol Williams

Kerry Bell

## The Organist in America – I



The first in an occasional series of features on leading organists in the United States

It is a clear crisp California morning on January 1, 2016 and Dr. Carol Williams arrives at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion in Balboa Park, San Diego. Today, she will play a concert to an audience who mostly have never been to or even heard of an “organ concert” before. This will continue a tradition of charity concerts

that Dr Williams began ten years ago. The donations for each New Years day concert go to a local non profit charity of Carol’s choosing and, on this occasion, it is Pegasus Rising, an organization that helps veterans with PTSD re-establish a life with the help of horses.

Carol Williams has an unshakable

bond with animals and a soft spot for their interactions with humans. She is a horse woman who owns and rides horses on her ranch in north county San Diego and, for this special day, a close friend has offered to bring a large Belgian Draft horse called Jay to attend and help in raising donations. Jay was a great hit among the estimated 3,000 tourists gathered that day. It helps that nothing else except the Zoo and the restrooms are open on that particular day of the year. So, for just over one hour of organ music, ranging from Max Reger (of course, remembering his 100th anniversary) to the new popular Star Wars movie themes and a few of her own compositions, Carol Williams ▶



Carol Williams at the Spreckels organ console

All photos courtesy of Carol Williams, [www.melcot.com](http://www.melcot.com)





entertained an enthusiastic crowd, and with the help of many volunteers raised \$1800 for the cause: a worthy hour spent. As a musician, Carol says that "Music should enhance life and musicians are here to serve and make being on this planet a better place. After all, music has no boundaries, its properties are cosmic."

From an early age, British-born Williams has been a determined lady. She has often said that "patience and ambition do not go together." At the age of five her parents dressed her in tights and expensive dance shoes, only to find her clinging to the side of the upright piano for the tap class lesson. The look on her face must have been 'Not Interested', but her gaze at the pianist was angelic. On seeing the child's determination, her parents quickly submitted to her receiving piano lessons. Being born of Welsh heritage, it was only normal that song was in Carol's psyche. Her grandmother and aunt both played the organ at Sunday church services and her father and mother were musically

very actively inclined. In fact, Carol has inherited a musical Welsh lineage and so it was only natural that she would venture into the world on this foundation.

Carol Williams turned out to be a very focused learner and could read music before she could read words. Early on, she developed a love of all types of music, and during her early music classes insisted on playing blues, jazz and popular music. She was once reprimanded for being caught rehearsing jazz on the church organ. Almost every teacher, professor and colleague would tell her that teaching would be the safe way to go but Carol had a vision that she was going to be a concert organist - and nothing was going to deter her from this idea. Her studies at the Royal Academy of Music were all shaped for her to be on the concert platform despite opposition from tutors and professors advising her to follow the safer teaching profession. Williams thought, "absolutely not!"

This attitude was challenged by

many professors and presented great problems and much confusion for her through the major academic years of her life. However, with hindsight, her determination fully prepared her for the tremendously rewarding life she leads now.

The musical pedigree of Carol Williams begins at the age of five, when she began private study of theory and piano. Then on to the Royal Academy of Music, where she won every performance prize in organ. David Sanger was her professor at the RAM and she idealized him. Carol loved him because he taught her so many different genres and she enjoyed spending time with him as he prepared for his major recitals. One occasion was at the Royal Festival Hall where she would get "to have a go" on her own. She was awarded the Peter Hurford Travelling Scholarship from the Royal College of Organists and spent a wonderful time travelling through Scandinavia, studying various organs and music. Since then, she has returned to Scandinavia as well as





*Carol Williams at the Spreckels organ console*

many other countries to perform, and has very fond memories of Scandinavian organs and its people.

Williams graduated from the RAM with every conceivable organ qualification. From there she went on to study in Paris with Daniel Roth at the Church of St. Sulpice, where these studies made a huge impact on Carol's life. Of all the schools with the classical organ repertoire, the French Romantic School has delighted her the most. The power and majesty of the French organs are the best in her opinion. Whilst playing at St. Ouen in Rouen, tears streamed down from her face. To Williams, this late Cavaillé-Coll organ was one of the most beautiful organs she had ever played. In Paris, she wasted no time in studying various organs and places and lapping up the French culture. She walked in the steps of César Franck as he would have visited St. Sulpice on Sunday mornings, and Carol, with her husband Kerry, visited the great composers' tombs – affording so much for them both to see and savour.

Williams enjoyed travelling with her father, playing concerts throughout the United Kingdom on all types of organs and even at times lugging a portable organ. Carol performed in many venues ranging from Westminster Abbey to the Tower Ballroom in Blackpool on a mighty Wurlitzer to small smoke filled pubs in obscure places. She loved them all.

Her father set up a tour of the USA, and her destiny began to fall into place. The warmth of the American people who engage her ambitious attitude was very attractive to her and, fulfilling what had been missing from her earlier experience. Carol loved New York and soon picked up the pace, feeling very much at home there.

Williams decided to study at Yale University and was granted a full scholarship, taking studies under the great Thomas Murray. At Yale, to fill her spare time she took on the role of University Chapel Organist. This was a crash course in church music and liturgy. Graduating from Yale, Williams

- never deterred from a challenge - was off to obtain her Doctorate at the Manhattan School of Music studying with McNeil Robinson with whom she quickly and easily developed a bond. She loved her time in New York City, the fiery temperament of New Yorkers, never lazy, always achieving. McNeil Robinson told her that she fitted right in! Again, to fill her time with the love of an organ, Carol held the position of Associate Organist at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Long Island's Garden City. Little did she know that this would be a big job. At this Cathedral she now fully experienced what it took to be a "church organist" because the "associate" does all the heavy lifting (in musical terms). Carol learned much about the dedication and knowledge of sacred music. This is why she has such a profound respect for organists that work in the church and teach. After this stage in her life, she was confident that this career was not for her.

During each official break from her studies, Carol continued travelling ►





Carol Williams at the Spreckels organ console

and performed concerts throughout the United States. She loves to travel, perform, meet people and see new places.

In 2001 while finishing her D.M.A. in New York City she was scrolling through a popular organ magazine under the classified ads for jobs. There was an interesting job from a place she had never heard of – San Diego. The advertisement was reminiscent of the old-time jobs in the United Kingdom where a town would have a Civic Organist play on a weekly basis in the town hall for free to the public. It was a job that rang true to her as her dissertation was on this very subject. “My God, could this be true!?” she thought. “Here in America!?” This was the exact position she had somehow dreamed of which she never thought would be available anywhere. Carol knew to hold on to her dreams, thinking that this job must be a “God send” to her.

On a rainy evening on the approach to San Diego airport, Carol could see a lit up Spreckels Organ Pavilion in the park from her window seat. There were

around 100 applicants interviewed. The field drew down to the final five that would have to perform a concert one Sunday afternoon at 2pm. This would be to choose San Diego's next Civic Organist.

Little did Carol know what “great acts” she would be able to create for people in celebration of accepting the position of San Diego Civic Organist! The news reported a caveat headline *The first woman in the world to be appointed Civic Organist.*

Carol embraced her new job - in fact, her new life - with a confident stride. She was on a path to make history as a Civic Organist, for San Diego and for the world. Since then, Carol has not looked back and dares to reshape musical reality everyday. She tasks herself to bring new and innovative talents to the organ world through the Spreckels Organ in Balboa Park. She began the “Spreckels Scholarship” grants and thus makes available for young students to perform for 2000 plus crowds at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion.

Carol also performs about 20 hours a year for charities, including some twelve hour concert marathons for non profit organisations like Operation Rebound, an organization helping veterans and first responders work back into society, together with concerts for the San Diego Humane Society (known as Bark in Balboa Park), the Red Cross and other organizations.

Every Sunday at 2pm for the City of San Diego she enlightens audiences to a variety of music. Over the past fifteen years of Carol's residency, the Spreckels Organ popularity has grown with her efforts exponentially world-wide. Carol initiated webcasting the Sunday at 2pm concerts and, involving the AGO (American Guild of Organists) in including the webcast on their website. Over the years, Carol has been a self appointed ambassador of the San Diego Spreckels Organ with her concertizing and the publicizing of concerts throughout the world. Carol continues to delight audiences with her versatile repertoire and unique personal audience engage-