

Organist Jonathan Dimmock

in conversation with Elizabeth Blumenstock

I managed to connect with globe-trotting organist Jonathan Dimmock by e-mail earlier this spring. Though we both nominally spend quite a bit of our time in the San Francisco Bay Area, our lives only occasionally overlap enough for us to catch a glimpse of each other.

My first question was, "What is the most compelling thing you are involved in outside of performance?"

JD I've always loved good conversations about philosophy and life, especially over a great meal. I think my interest in philosophy led to my desire to communicate on a mass scale by writing blogs. Several years ago I started putting those blogs on my [website](#). The focus of the blogs has been to explore what it's like to live the life of a musician in general, and an organist in particular. I've had a great time, sharing thoughts and stories with people.



The blogging for my website led to another blogging idea, namely interviewing great conductors and composers of our day — especially those who think outside the box, those who are overtly working to use music for the betterment of humanity.

For nearly twenty years I've been developing a project to pull music out of the realm of entertainment, and to give it its rightful place as an important tool in helping make the world a better place. A year ago, I founded a nonprofit organization, entitled The Resonance Project, that seeks to use music in international conflict resolution. I'm extremely passionate about this; and it just happens to coincide with some amazing discoveries in the field of neuroscience - having to do with brainwaves synchronizing while listening to live music. The result of this synchronization is heightened empathy, or in other words, the possibility of building relationships on common ground.

The project, even though it is still in its infancy, has received some great support, with interest from President Obama (a personal letter to me), people at the United Nations, the U.S. State Department, and two former Secretaries of State (Rice and Clinton). More information about this can be found on our [website](#).

EB *My next question was, “What organ thrilled you the most to play?” I slightly regretted this question, because it reminded me of an impossible question I’ve often been asked in interviews, namely, “What is your favorite piece of music?” Favorite anythings are very difficult to name without a great deal of hemming and hawing. Let’s see how Jonathan managed this one...*

JD This is a little bit of a trick question, since my answer is bound to get the response of: “Oh, but what about such-and-such an organ?” Each one is vastly different. But I actually can answer the question. The Christian Müller organ in the Bavokerk in Haarlem, Holland, is unquestionably the most stunning organ, visually, in the world — and that’s saying a lot! ([Here’s a link](#) to one of many photos of this beautiful instrument.) Having the instrument to myself for several days, while I prepared and recorded a CD of Bach’s music, was unlike any experience I’ve ever had.

This famous organ was built in 1738, right at the peak of the Golden Age of organ building. Any time I sit down to play an old organ, I do so with utmost respect for the instrument itself. It’s like having tea with a grand dame: she’s not going to tell you her secrets right away! You must get to know her first. Only gradually will she allow you to discover how incredible she is.

For me, when I play music at an organ, I am engaging in a three-way conversation: the composer is there, the organ itself is speaking (with the building’s acoustics serving as its interpreter), and then there’s me — what I wish to express. Of the three of us, the most important “person” is the organ! The organ gets the final say about tempo, about rubato, about how to approach (touch) the keyboard, about how much “space” is around the notes, etc. The composer is second in command. I come last. I basically just go along for the ride, consciously allowing the composer to channel through me, and very much in collusion with the organ.

And with the instrument in Haarlem, what a master she is! She was loved by Mozart, by Handel, by Mendelssohn, and by thousands of other organists, both great and humble. We now know, through the world of science, that all physical objects maintain the vibration of those who touch them. And even more so when music-making is involved. It’s not just the keys themselves; it’s the pipes, the case, and even the very walls of the building that are holding these vibrations. To know that I am entering into that stream of energy, of vibration, and augmenting it with my own contribution, is both sobering and wildly ecstatic.

EB *Thrilling, thank you! And finally, what book(s) are you reading right now?*

JD I love to read and always have many books I’m reading simultaneously. I lean more towards nonfiction, but I do love poetry, and a really good book of fiction. I recently finished two books that grabbed me: *The Island at the Center of the World*, which is all about the Dutch settling New Amsterdam (New York) and how American philosophy is deeply entrenched with the Dutch. It was while reading that book that I made the connection that our Pilgrim Fathers would have, almost assuredly, heard Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck play the organ in Amsterdam. Sweelinck is the father of organ music and organ teaching, the first known organ recitalist, the first known organ virtuoso, and one of my favorite composers.”

I then read *The Hacking of the American Mind*, which is all about neuroscience and brainwashing, most especially the evils of sugar.

I'm reading two books of poetry at the moment, Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver's new collection entitled *Devotions*.

Other books I'm reading right now are *Into the Magic Shop: A Neurosurgeon's Quest to Discover the Mysteries of the Brain and the Secrets of the Heart*; Ursula Le Guin's *No Time to Spare*; Carl Jung's *The Red Book*; Peter Ostwald's *Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and the Tragedy of Genius*; I.K. Taimni's *The Science of Yoga*; Yogananda's *Commentaries on the Bible*, also his commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita; Robert Stucky's *The Tantric Jesus: Christ as God, Guru, and Self*; Andrew Harvey's *Savage Grace: Living Resiliently in the Dark Night of the Globe*; Mark Helprin's *Paris in the Present Tense*; and (yes, I admit it!) Dan Brown's latest book, *Origin*.

The difficulty for me is that I love books, but I'm an extremely slow reader. Being an aurally oriented person, I have to hear words in my head in order to understand them. Seeing them is meaningless until I sound them out. So, I only read books written by people who love the sound of the language. Life is too short for me to read anything dry, only to try to glean informative content. It's all about beauty!

EB *I feel better now! I am not alone in being a terribly slow reader, nor for having several very different books going at the same time. I guess we all get what we can, as we are able! I hope you will be able to get to Jonathan's recital, which looks absolutely superb.*



Organist Jonathan Dimmock's solo program in this year's Festival explores Bach's fascination with French music, and the strong influence it had on his life and compositional style.

Monday, June 18, 2018 at 8 p.m.

St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church, Corona del Mar, CA
Further information [here](#).

For information about tickets and subscriptions to this year's Baroque Music Festival, Corona del Mar, visit the Festival [website](#).

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