
“Albert Schweitzer Playing Bach at Lambarene”
The American Guild of Organists Installation Service

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Northway Christian Church ~ Dallas, Texas

Dr. Douglas B. Skinner

My older sister gave me a copy of Albert Schweitzer’s book The Quest for the Historical Jesus for my twelfth birthday back in 1965. I’d like to tell you that it was because I was theologically precocious, a spiritual prodigy, but I can’t. You see, it would be another ten years, when I was in my first semester of Seminary, before I read that book with any degree of understanding. And as I recall, my New Testament professor there had some serious questions about how well I had really understood it even then.

No, my sister will tell you that she gave me that book as a gift when I turned 12 because she was not going to spend more than three dollars and that’s what it cost, and because she knew that I was “religious” and it had the name “Jesus” in the title. Oh yeah, that and the fact that Albert Schweitzer was its author.

As you know, Albert Schweitzer was the Mother Teresa of the first half of the twentieth century; he was the icon of humanitarianism; the poster child for what the commitment to costly compassion looked like. His distinctive mop of white hair and brushy mustache were as distinctive as they were recognizable worldwide. He was perhaps the most powerful embodiment in his generation of Christ’s call to take up the cross and follow.

I first learned about Albert Schweitzer from looking at the pictures in Life magazine. My grandmother had the subscription, and she would pass the magazines on to us whenever she was finished with them. And so it was that in February of 1965 an issue of Life magazine fell into my hands with a great big color picture of Dr. Albert Schweitzer on the cover. It was his 90th birthday. Before my birthday in October arrived later that same year, he would be gone. But not before I had made his acquaintance through the glossy pages of that magazine.

In that memorable picture on its cover he was dressed in a white shirt and was wearing a slightly crooked back bow tie. But it was his eyes that got my attention. There was something remarkable in his look: call it kindness... call it compassion... call it wisdom... call it Christ. I saw it there in the face on the cover of that magazine as I had seen it in none other up to that point in my life; and it drew me in. And so it was that in 1965 Albert Schweitzer became one of my heroes. I couldn’t get enough of him.

Back in those days my mother took us kids to the public library every week when we were growing up, and so it was that over time I checked out every book on Albert Schweitzer that they had. I read every word, and looked at every picture. And my favorite one of them all was Albert Schweitzer sitting at his organ, his right hand on the keyboard, his left hand holding a pencil marking a score, and a look of absolute concentration on his face. I don't know what it was about that picture that so captured my attention back then. But I can tell you just exactly why it still rivets me today.

The instrument at which Albert Schweitzer sat for the picture in his room at the hospital in Africa had been a special gift to him from the Bach Society of Paris in appreciation for his contribution to the world of music. Schweitzer began his musical training on a piano when he was five years old. At the age of eight he had shifted his attention to the organ. And he started playing in church when he was nine. By the time he was twenty Albert Schweitzer was filling concert halls across Europe playing Bach. In 1903 he published a critically acclaimed book on Bach, and in 1905 followed it up with a book on organ building and restoration. You see, before Albert Schweitzer became a doctor and went to Africa, he had achieved fame as a musician, an organist whose primary focus was Bach. In fact, there is a tradition that says that it was while listening to a Bach organ composition that Albert Schweitzer made his final decision to go to Africa in service to humanity and obedience to Christ. As he would put it later, *"it was incomprehensible to me that I should lead a happy life when so many people around me were struggling with suffering and grief."* And so after 30 years of distinguishing himself as a Biblical scholar and concert organist, Albert Schweitzer went to medical school and wound up in Africa.

When he made this decision, Albert Schweitzer believed that it required of him three specific sacrifices – the loss of financial independence, the renunciation of the academic life to which he had become quite attached, and the abandonment of the organ. But what he discovered, just as Abraham did on top of Mount Moriah where he had gone to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son of promise, was that God had something else in mind.

And so, Albert Schweitzer played Bach every night at Lambarene. Listen to how one visitor to the compound in Africa put it –

Lying in bed there in the pitch black night after the lamps were turned off made one acutely aware of the thin and fragile barrier between oneself and the untamed nature outside... Then, through the darkness, mingling with the rustling of the leaves and the buzzing of the mosquitoes, came the most wonderful, crystal clear melodies--it made you hold your breath in awe. The great organist Schweitzer playing Bach! Every evening after retreating to his room, he would sit at his specially built organ and play Bach for hours... A joyful message, the melody flowed out to the trees and found its way to the tired listeners in the houses around. It reached us all, deeper and more meaningful than in any other place, holding out a promise that somewhere, some time, beauty and kindness will triumph,

that love and harmony will prevail in a land ... the promised land we all are longing to find. (Louise Jilek-Aall)

And this is why I like that picture of Albert Schweitzer playing Bach at Lambarene so much. In one memorable image it holds together forever the way that music and service, art and compassion, beauty and benevolence, combined seamlessly in the life of one of the great souls our world has ever known. As Erica Anderson, the photographer responsible for the 1957 Academy Award-winning documentary on Albert Schweitzer put it, "*It is not inappropriate for Schweitzer's life to be thought of in terms of music, a symphony of themes that taken together form a pattern of power and beauty.*" And it's this same "*pattern of power and beauty*" that we who love Bach and organs need to claim as our own here tonight.

Somewhere I've read that the Roman Catholic Order of the Little Brothers began when its founder began delivering hot meals and bouquets of flowers to the elderly poor in Paris after WW II. Today the motto of the Little Brothers as they continue to work with the elderly is "*flowers before bread*" because they believe that the human need for beauty is just as deep and real as is the human need for food. They understand that bread is a necessity, but they'll argue that flowers are too. And this is a truth that I suspect Albert Schweitzer would have appreciated. After all, he played Bach every night at Lambarene, and he was real fond of saying that everybody needs to find their own Lambarene.

Yo-Yo Ma, who was a participant in the 1991 Albert Schweitzer Symposium in Boston, has written of the experience –

During a concert with the Longwood Symphony Orchestra there were free seats reserved for the homeless and those living in shelters. And although the concert was well attended, those seats remained empty. I was quite struck by this and have consequently, in my various travels, tried to visit shelters and children to play...It is a comfort knowing that there are people in other fields that have an idealism for thought and civic-mindedness. I feel we share a reverence for life and try to somehow incorporate this into our daily lives. We are not alone... this is perhaps the most important lesson that I have learned from the life of Albert Schweitzer.

And it's this lesson that's right there for all to see in the picture of Albert Schweitzer playing Bach at Lambarene. If you've got Bach, then it's time to find your Lambarene. And if you know where your Lambarene is, then by all means, take some time for Bach. Bread and flowers; beauty and compassion; Bach and Lambarene; it takes both for us to be whole.

Sources

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“The Albert Schweitzer Page.” www.pcisys.net