

# McNeil Robinson II

(b. March 16, 1943, Birmingham, Ala.; d. May 9, 2015, New York City)

McNeil Robinson II died on Saturday, May 9, 2015, in New York City, following a long illness. An internationally renowned organist, conductor, composer, and teacher, Robinson was a luminous figure in the musical community of New York City for more than half a century. He died in Manhattan where he had spent his professional life, but loved his home in Westchester County, N.Y., most of all, where he and his wife, Maria Cristina Robinson, had lived. In addition to his wife, he is survived by a brother, Robert Michael (Janice) Robinson, and many nieces and nephews.

McNeil Robinson enjoyed a distinguished career in organ performance and composition for the concert stage, church, and synagogue. He served as organist and music director for some of the most prominent and publicly visible religious institutions in New York City, including Holy Trinity R.C. Church, Park Avenue Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*), the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, the Church of the Holy Family at the United Nations, and the Trinity Institute of Trinity Church (Wall Street). Robinson's tenure at Park Avenue Synagogue, where he was appointed at the recommendation of Leonard Bernstein, spanned five decades. In addition, he had long associations with St. Thomas Church (Fifth Avenue) and the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine.

A recitalist of international distinction, Robinson performed throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan, and was acclaimed as one of America's leading virtuosos by the international press. Although he excelled in the performance of music from all eras, he was best known as one of the world's finest performers of the art of improvisation. His recordings can be heard on the l'Oiseau Lyre, Decca, LIRS, and Musical Heritage Society labels.

Robinson was a proponent for historical performance practice in the performance of music from all eras. He conducted the first twentieth-century performances of selected works by Cavalli, Carissimi, Pergolesi, Alessandro Scarlatti, and Zelinka, as well as early works of Mozart and Mehul. He premiered twentieth-century works by many of the more prominent composers of the day, including Jacob Druckman, Vladimir Ussachevsky, Robert Starer, David Diamond, Charles Morrow, and Jack Gottlieb.

An active composer, Robinson's music is heard both on the concert stage and in sacred settings. He was equally comfortable writing for the Jewish service as he was for his own Christian faith. He received commissions from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the American Guild of Organists, Group for Contemporary Composers, Meet the Composer, and by numerous churches throughout the United States. Robinson's music has been performed at Lincoln Center in New York and Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, on network radio and television, and in churches and synagogues throughout the country.

Of his compositions for the organ, he was most proud of his *Concerto for Organ and Orchestra*, commissioned by the American Guild of Organists and the San Francisco Symphony for the 1984 AGO National Convention, and *Dismas Variations*, which found its way into the required repertoire for the AGO National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance. Robinson's works are published by Theodore Presser, C.F. Peters, and Oxford University Press. His hymn tunes and service music can be found in a wide variety of hymnals and sacred music collections.

Robinson is celebrated as having been one of the finest organ teachers in the world, having drawn students from four continents. He joined the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music in 1984 and chaired the organ department there between 1991 and 2015. He also chaired the organ department at the Mannes College of Music, and taught at the Hartt School of Music, Queens College, and Yale University. His students hold prominent posts throughout North America and have won top prizes in national and international organ playing competitions. Robinson taught more winners in the AGO National Competition in Organ Improvisation than any other single teacher. In recent years, these laureates included Jason Roberts, Justin Bischof, and Aaron David Miller.

Throughout the history of the organ, the makings of a complete, well-rounded organist have required virtuosity in four unique and complementary disciplines: performing, composing, improvising, and teaching. In the organ-playing profession, there have been many who have been proficient at any one of these, some who have been proficient at two or more, but only a very few who have achieved distinction in all four of these disciplines. This has been especially true among organists living in America. McNeil Robinson was one of the rare, exceptionally talented musicians who received international acclaim as a performer, composer, improvisateur, and teacher.

McNeil Robinson was born in Birmingham, Alabama. He was a natural-born musician—a prodigy who quickly built an exhaustive repertoire of piano literature, and at the age of 14, entered the Birmingham Conservatory as a piano student of Hugh Thomas. By the age of 17, Robinson had received great critical acclaim as a pianist and performed as soloist with the Birmingham Symphony (now the Alabama Symphony Orchestra) under the direction of Arthur Bennett Lipkin and Arthur Winograd.

Robinson attended Birmingham Southern College as a full-scholarship student, and in 1962, moved to New York City to continue his piano studies as a full-scholarship student of Leonard Shure at the Mannes College of Music. He also studied privately with Rosina Lhévinne and Beveridge Webster. In 1966, he entered the Juilliard School as a scholarship student. There, he began his organ study with Vernon de Tar and Anthony Newman, and composition with Vincent Persichetti. He graduated from Juilliard in 1970 with the coveted Juilliard Faculty Award.

Following his study at Juilliard, Robinson continued his organ study with George Faxon, Russell Saunders, and Catharine Crozier. He also studied organ with Guy Bovet and Montserrat Torrent at the University of Salamanca (Spain), and composition with Yehudi Wyner and Jacob Druckman.

A significant influence in Robinson's life was the legendary Marcel Dupré, who was especially renowned for his skill at improvisation. The art of organ improvisation, as it has been practiced in Europe for centuries, is an art form in which only a few organists in any era ever achieve distinction. Today, only a handful of American organists are proficient at extemporization. Robinson's natural talent at improvisation, combined with his pursuit of Dupré's scholastic exercises and Dupré's praise of his playing and encouragement, elevated Robinson to the heights only attained by some of Europe's all-time greats.

Dupré's influence on Robinson was not limited to improvisation, although that in itself was considerable. Robinson's mastery of Dupré's legato technique enhanced his performances of nineteenth and twentieth-century French organ repertoire, including the works of Franck, Vierne, Widor, Dupré, Duruflé, and Messiaen. Several of Dupré's works became signature pieces for Robinson, including the *Variations sur un Noël*, Op. 20; *Sept Pièces*, Op. 27; *Trois Préludes et Fugues*, Op. 7; and *Vêpres du Commun*, Op. 18. Speaking of Robinson's recording of the *Vêpres du Commun*, Dupré wrote: "A magnificent performance of my work from every point of view, technique, registration, phrasing, and interpretation."

Inspired by the masters of previous generations, McNeil Robinson was a master of his time—a performer, composer, improvisateur, and teacher—a complete organist. Robinson's life and career will be celebrated in New York City at a date, time, and location to be announced. Please visit the American Guild of Organists' website, [Agohq.org](http://Agohq.org), for updated information.

—F. Anthony Thurman, DMA  
CHERRY HILL, NEW JERSEY  
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