

A life in music

Bridgeport boy Douglas Haas
didn't hesitate when
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
called him home

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DWIGHT STORRING

Douglas Haas was a 30-year-old organist at a church in Stuttgart, Germany, when the letter that changed his life arrived from Kitchener. Would he come home to become the organist at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church?

Another up-and-coming musician might have hesitated. He'd studied with the best. He had been organist at a large church in Rome, Italy, when he was only 20 years old. He'd toured in Europe. He was married with a child in Germany.

But Haas didn't think twice. He saw it as the perfect opportunity to repay the many people who had helped him when he was the "undisciplined kid" from the scrappy Village of Bridgeport, now part of Kitchener.

There were the music teachers who gave him lessons for free, the devoted school crossing guard who held the neighbourhood bullies at bay, the organ manufacturer who gave him a job and let him practise after-hours on his instruments, and many other people who helped him find work and schooling.

What's more, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in downtown Kitchener was home to the largest Presbyterian congregation in Canada. The church had a beautiful, four-manual Casavant pipe organ, "an experience of beauty," he had always admired.



Douglas Haas has been manning the keyboard for more than 50 years at Kitchener's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

It's time to go home, he decided.
“I think I had a guardian angel,” says Haas, 81, who was fêted last year for his 50 years at St. Andrew’s.
“When I got the letter, it was like a lightning bolt going off in my head. There was no doubt in my mind.
“It was as if it was always meant to be.”

Haas is as eager to learn something new as he is humble about his prodigious musical talents. A fit man – a Tai Chi practitioner who has studied martial arts – he’s also a storyteller with a wry sense of humour. With a gleam in those inquisitive, blue eyes, he can tell more than one tale of ghosts in churches while he practised; or of a joke he once played at a Halloween noon-hour concert in which the organ mysteriously played by itself while a life-sized doll resembling Bach raced down a fish line strung between the balcony and the organ.

Now, in his 51st year at St. Andrew’s church where he is director of music, Haas is helping the choir prepare for a performance of spirituals at the famous Carnegie Hall in New York. About 18 of the 40-member choir will join choirs from across the United States on June 17 to sing “Spirit Suite” by American composer Mark Hayes.
St. Andrew’s Sanctuary Choir, directed by Gordon Burnett, also conductor of the Renaissance Singers, is skilled at singing everything from classical requiems to gospel. The choir is enriched by music student scholars and graduates.
Distinguished Concerts International New York, a leading concert producer, discovered the choir on YouTube.
“They put together fantastic concerts using talent like ours. They book Carnegie Hall and they sell out. It’s a great honour and they’re all excited as anything,” Haas says.

“It will be awe-inspiring,” says Burnett, who has performed once before at Carnegie Hall – with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and Toronto Symphony Orchestra.
“When you first walk in and you stand there and look up and you think of all the people who have stood on that stage, that takes your breath away.”
Meanwhile, Haas continues to organize the Wednesday noon-hour concert series he founded in 1975 to introduce music to a diverse audience and give musicians an opportunity to perform. The concerts are part of the rhythm of downtown city life.
He’s organist for Sunday services, which gain an even wider audience when the service is aired on TV twice a week.
He has performed and recorded throughout North America and Europe, and has played grand organs in famous cathedrals such as York Minster and Gloucester. He has taught at Waterloo’s two universities.

His creativity has taken a visual turn. Haas is also a photographer who has published a book of prose and photographs featuring the stained-glass windows at St. Andrew’s church. He has been passionate about photography since he and his wife, Sheryl Loeffler, a poet, author and musician, fell in love with Malta in 2005 when Haas was on a year’s sabbatical. At least once a year, they return to Malta where Haas has performed at concerts including one at the Presidential Palace in 2010.
He was the producer-fundraiser for the recently released documentary film, “Care for the Child: The Story of the Bridgeport General,” directed by Rob Ring. School crossing guard Frank Groff, nicknamed the General, was Haas’s neighbour and defender against bullies when Haas was a child in Bridgeport.
Today, Haas is taking online master class courses from Annie Leibovitz, well-known

American portrait photographer, and celebrated German film director Werner Herzog.
Sitting in his Waterloo condominium where sunlight pours through large windows onto his orchids, Haas speaks animatedly about light and exposures and his next photography assignment from Leibovitz. He’s pondering what to do. Leibovitz, who has photographed famous people ranging from John Lennon and Yoko Ono to Queen Elizabeth II, has asked her students to do a portrait series that shows “what this person is and who they are.”
Haas is up to the challenge. “Annie has taught me to forget about my technical knowledge and start taking pictures,” he says.
Growing up in Bridgeport in the late 1930s and ’40s, Haas was the musically talented kid who sang in the church choir and developed a passion for the

piano and organ. His father, unemployed in his early years, later became a tool-and-die maker. His mother, a “frustrated homemaker” at a time when women stayed in the home, had a lot of “driving ambition,” which she passed on to her son, he says.
Haas’s musical mother gave him his first piano lessons when he was four. He’d always liked the sound of the organ at what is now Bridgeport United Church. “Not the power, but the quiet sounds,” he says.
“It has been the quiet sounds that I try to get out of the organ. Anyone can pull out all the stops and make sound, and it’s a true artist who can make the organ quiet and beautiful.”
Haas was a boy soprano in the choir, something that wasn’t lost on the neighbourhood bullies. “Kids lined up to beat me up,” he says. “That is when the General saved me several times.” The Bridgeport



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General walked young Haas to the bus stop in the mornings.

When he was about 10, Haas started organ lessons with Glenn Kruspe, then-organist-choir director at the former Zion United Church in Kitchener, which the family later attended. (Kruspe conducted the Kitchener-Waterloo Philharmonic Choir, now called Grand Philharmonic Choir, and was a founder and first conductor of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra.) At a young age, Haas was winning organ and piano competitions in Toronto.

“I’ve hardly ever paid for a lesson in my life,” Haas says. “People like Glenn knew I had no money.”

Haas was determined to be a musician.

But as the oldest of three brothers, he was expected to find a job after Grade 8 to help his family. Keen to go on to high school, Haas asked Jacob Clare (J.C.) Hallman to give him a job at his Waterloo manufacturing company, which made organs.

“He was a fantastic Mennonite guy who let me clean shop after school,” Haas says. “When he trusted me, he gave me the key and said, ‘practise.’ I kept my father happy because I was able to bring money home and I got to go to high school.

“That’s why (I have) my need and my passion to come back to the community and give what they gave me. Because without this community, I’d still be out in Bridgeport sweeping floors.”

Just out of high school, Haas had a part-time job demonstrating organs and pianos for Heintzman and Co. in Toronto, a well-known piano manufacturer, after a competition adjudicator and Heintzman employee offered him free lessons and a job. That was Frederick Geoghegan, whose musical talent is described in the online Canadian Encyclopedia, along with Haas’s

name as his distinguished pupil. Haas is also featured in the encyclopedia.

Haas’s life was classical music, but he could also play Broadway or cocktail lounge music if requested by a customer eyeing a Heintzman piano. He entered the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto, paying for the first time for lessons from Earle Moss, another member of the Who’s Who in Canadian music.



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An exchange scholarship sent the 19-year-old youth to Rome to study with a famous Vatican organist and music professor, Fernando Germani. Heintzman co-workers took up a collection to pay his way by boat to Liverpool, then on to France and, finally, a bus to Rome.

“It was otherworldly,” Haas remembers.

“I was never scared. I had that sort of Bridgeport toughness in me. My whole life was just work and practice and going to concerts. I’d never conceived of a place like Rome and Italy.”

Looking around at his fellow students in the academy at Santa Cecilia in Rome, Haas realized he was among the best. He was “fanatical” about his music; “there was nothing else,” he says. That is, “until a couple of years in Rome, I discovered wine and women,” he says with a laugh.

Haas served as organist at the large All Saints Anglican Church in the centre of Rome. “Because I was organist at the English church, I got to meet a lot of people and they introduced me to their society.” It included actresses working at Cinecittà, a large film studio and the centre of Italian cinema.

One of his “greatest experiences” was when he was organist at All Saints Anglican Church in Rome in 1960. The Archbishop of Canterbury then, Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, had an historical meeting with Pope John Paul XXIII there and Haas was the organist.

“I was a kid, a bit unsure of myself,” Haas says. “He (Fisher) made me feel as if I was the best organist in the world.

“The night before he met the Pope, there was a huge ecumenical service in Rome. I was the organist for that. He (Fisher)

was the officiating clergyman. That is one of the great experiences of my life. He showed a genuine interest.”

A meeting with Helmuth Rilling, a brilliant fellow student at a summer school in the city of Siena in Tuscany, Italy, led Haas to Germany. Haas, who spoke German, Italian and some French, was Rilling’s assistant for a couple of years, filling in for the busy man, playing the organ and conducting his choir when he was away.



Organist Douglas Haas and the St. Andrew’s Church choir prepare to perform in June in New York.

“He was building up his career as Germany’s top Bach expert” and was creating a Bach academy to which world experts would come, Haas says.

Before getting a church of his own there, Haas began studying for a master’s degree in church music and theology, working in a shoe factory and warehouse to pay for school.

Ever interested in cutting-edge technology, Haas came up with a way to streamline the factory’s operations by getting leather to work stations more quickly. “We’ll use it,” the comptroller told him. “What can we do for you? They’re not going to like you in the warehouse anymore.” So they put him to work in the office.

With Rilling’s help with concert engagements, Haas began touring. “I can’t tell you how incredible it was. I thought Italy was beautiful and then Spain was Italy times two, with all the passion and their love of life.

“Once I got to Germany, I was a few years older and started to remember my roots,” Haas says. So he played in concerts wherever he was invited. “There was no church too small. I always said, ‘yes.’ ”

The letter from Kitchener arrived in 1967. He thought of his local benefactors. He thought of St. Andrew’s organ. “I used to sit

in the balcony as a kid and listen to it. I’d never played it. It was beyond me to ask.”

He thought of the instructor who had told his talented students that organist jobs at the great cathedrals were already taken. “He said, ‘Don’t think that you’re going to walk into a cathedral and become their organist. Go anywhere and build your own cathedral’ and I think that’s what I’ve done at St. Andrew’s.”

“Welcome home, Dougie.” Those were the first words from Rev. Dr. Finlay Stewart, St. Andrew’s minister, to Haas when he returned to Kitchener. It was the beginning of a strong friendship between the two men who both enjoyed a joke.

But the transition wasn’t all smooth. No one remembered Haas having an accent, which he’d acquired from speaking German. They didn’t recognize the boy from Bridgeport. It took time to win over the choir, which was devoted to its former organist. But it wasn’t long before Haas’s warmth and stirring organ performances did their magic.

“In a very few years, he set the church organist world on fire,” says James Brown, a fellow organist at a neighbouring church



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then who became a pastor and friend. Brown and his wife now sing in St. Andrew's choir.

"He's a very humble man and often organists have big egos because they have big instruments," says Brown, retired pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Waterloo. "He's not only a good technician. He's also a researcher and musicologist. He plays things authentically.

"He plays exquisitely but he's never flashy." His adult children from his first marriage have followed in his musical footsteps. Annette is a singer and Christopher is head of the music department at a Vancouver high school.

The late Rev. Dr. Grant MacDonald, who took over from Stewart, was committed to Haas's musical ministry. MacDonald, who died March 24, helped Haas build the choir. They telephoned everyone they knew to ask

them to join.

MacDonald, in conversation with Brown last year for the celebration marking Haas's 50 years at St. Andrew's, said: "I was often so lost in the music at our services that I needed time to recover; and it was in those experiences that I learned there were more ways to worship than through the words of the preacher."

MacDonald sent him on study leaves, including a project management course that taught him about large church administration. The church wanted to increase its community outreach and Haas had the idea to offer noon-hour concerts in 1975.

The concerts are a fun and educational interlude for an audience of at least 100 people who can buy an informal lunch and listen. Performers have ranged from an adept whistler to university music students and virtuoso pianists.

"I tell everyone, 'This is an informal concert. If a baby cries, it means the baby is there,' " Haas says.

Koichi Inoue, a Brampton music teacher and performer who was born in Japan and studied at Indiana University in the U.S., asked Haas if he might play.

"I had immigrated to Canada and didn't know where to perform and I had a bit of trouble to get started in a new country," says Inoue, who has been playing at the noon-hour concerts every year since 2008.

Haas, a "very high-class performer," helped him overcome his nervousness and develop as a performer, Inoue says. "It was very important to have this experience at the noon-hour concert." Inoue's students have had the same opportunity.

"I feel he kind of opens the door for newcomers. It's not always like this" for young performers, Inoue says. "Not every

musician takes care of other musicians because they are so much trying to survive themselves."

Besides teaching and performing, Inoue started the Brampton Chamber Concert Series that he fashioned after Haas's idea. "I want to welcome anyone to play in Brampton," he says. "The modern society is not the best for artists today. Many performers today are struggling to find a place to play."

Haas's noon-hour concerts bring many people into the church who wouldn't ordinarily be there. They have helped all kinds of musicians to get to know each other.

"Doug is a world-class concert artist, teacher, examiner and recording artist," wrote Brown in his nomination of Haas for the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award, now called the Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers.

Haas received the award in 2016.

Among other distinctions, he has been awarded a Fellowship of the Royal Canadian College of Organists (honoris causa).

"He has toured Europe and the United States. But he never forgets his hometown and the wealth of tuition and encouragement he received as a student from his teachers here," Brown says. "Our community and beyond have received an immense gift from him."

Today, Haas is optimistic about the music students he meets, who "are better than we were at that age."

"I feel I want to help them as much as I can."

He feels strongly that classical music helps bring people to church and he has seen it happen with his top students, one of whom is in Montreal packing the church.


As for his own career, Haas says he will perform "hymns of joy, loss and devotion" and classical music until he can't do it anymore.

"I'm not going to play 'Mickey Mouse' until I have to and then maybe I'll stop playing," Haas says.

Haas is a worthy proponent of traditional music at church who has remained true to his beliefs.

When Haas sits at the organ, "he becomes part of the instrument and the instrument becomes part of him," Burnett says. "He knows the instrument so well they're like the best of friends."

His musical ambitions fulfilled, Haas is always on the lookout for new things to learn.

"I've never forgotten my roots and I'm still a Bridgeport kid. I'm in awe of everything I see," he says. "I feel I'll never learn enough in one lifetime." 



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